

Road of Death

Hmong tribesmen are killing travellers to the north

By Bertil Lintner in Vientiane

When Claude Vincent decided that he would go by minibus to Luang Prabang, he had few worries. The French tour operator, who had lived in Laos for decades, had done the overland trip north from Vientiane many times. But the journey he took on September 11 was his last.

Near the town of Muang Kasi, up in the hills about 200 kilometres before Luang Prabang, armed men opened fire on Vincent's minibus. The shooting continued for 10 minutes, reducing the vehicle to a wreck and killing Vincent and five of his Lao staff. Believing they had killed all the passengers, the assailants stole whatever they could lay their hands on. But two of the passengers survived to tell their tale to the authorities.

Two days later, the Swedish embassy in Vientiane posted an announcement in a city restaurant frequented by expatriate Swedes, warning them not to travel overland to Luang Prabang. The following day, the official news agency *Khao San Pathet Lao*, which seldom acknowledges that there is any security problem in the country, carried a detailed report on the September 11 ambush. It was followed by a surprisingly candid statement: "The stretch of road between Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang is a dangerous area."

The truth of that assessment was proved again on September 20, when a petrol tanker was ambushed near the place Vincent was gunned down. Only five days later, armed men shot up a passenger bus. This incident occurred closer to the market town of Vang Vieng, further south of what had been considered the actual danger zone. "There has been a definite increase in violent incidents along the road to Luang Prabang," says a Western diplomat in Vientiane. "We recommend to our citizens that they fly there, not travel by road any longer."

But who are the ambushers? Are they bandits, as the government claims, or insurgents, as the foreign community in Vientiane prefers to call them? To avoid



Uncertain journey: Internal security is once more a serious concern for Vientiane.

offending ethnic sensitivities, the government has refrained from stating what everyone else in Vientiane knows: The "armed men" are ethnic Hmong tribesmen. Muang Kasi, near where Vincent was killed, is along the Hmong's old infiltration route from Thailand to their stronghold in the Phou Bia mountain complex northeast of Vientiane.

Thousands of Hmong, supported by America's Central Intelligence Agency, fought against the communist Pathet Lao during the civil war in Laos in the 1960s and 1970s. Following the communist victory in 1975, tens of thousands of Hmong fled Laos to refugee camps in Thailand, though others kept their weapons and continued to fight Vientiane.

Initially, the Hmong resistance received clandestine backing from Thailand, which at that time had a strained relationship with the new communist regime in Laos. But as Thai-Lao relations improved in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Hmong's main source of support dried up. Hmong staging points in the Thai

province of Nan were closed, and most of the refugees in Thailand were resettled abroad, primarily in the United States. More than 27,000 were repatriated to Laos under the auspices of the United Nations.

In 1992, the Thais shut down the Ban Vinai refugee camp, once a sprawling settlement of thousands of Hmong. But there are still more than 4,000 refugees from Laos, mainly Hmong, at Napho in northeastern Thailand. The U.S. government has accepted 2,900 of them for resettlement, but the fate of the remainder is uncertain.

Another 14,000 Hmong live at the Wat Tham Krabok drug-rehabilitation centre in Saraburi in central Thailand, far from the Lao border. The Thai authorities have just announced that those Hmong will be issued with identity cards to enable them to stay in Thailand. Wat Tham Krabok's

BETTER TO FLY

Hmong attacks pose dangers on Laos's overland routes



abbot, Magsaysay Award winner Phra Chamroon Panchan, has always denied involvement in the anti-Vientiane movement. He insists that the Hmong at his temple are drug addicts, and that their families who live in the border areas are not part of the insurgency.

Laos's foreign minister, Somsavat Lengsavad, acknowledged in an interview with the *REVIEW* in Vientiane that "We are getting more cooperation from the Thais now." But while noting that Thai-Lao relations have improved considerably, Vientiane is still not convinced that the Hmong rebels have no outside help at all.

When the joint Thai-Lao Border Security Commission met in September this year, the Lao side raised the issue of "bad elements" living in "the Thai Chiang Kham district, Phayao province and Wiang Khaen in Chiang Rai." The situation, reported the *Vientiane Times* of Sep-

tember 27, "has caused distrust among the two neighbours."

Fund-raising activities by the Hmong in the U.S. have also given Vientiane cause for concern. There are roughly 150,000 Hmong in the U.S., concentrated in the states of Wisconsin, Minnesota and California. The old Hmong leader from the pre-1975 war, Gen. Vang Pao, resides in Santa Ana near Los Angeles, and tapes with recorded speeches by him have been found in Laos.

When Vang first arrived in the U.S. in the late 1970s, he set up a Hmong welfare organization called the Lao Family Community Inc. This soon came under fire for extorting money from the refugees. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported in November 1990 that each refugee was obliged to donate \$5-10 a month to the Lao National Liberation Front, an umbrella organization of resistance groups with Vang as its "defence minister."

Lao Foreign Minister Somsavat neither confirms nor denies that Hmong in America are supporting local insurgents. "We're watching the situation closely," he says diplomatically, while adding: "It's high time they stop these activities."

A Western aid worker believes that Hmong bands in Laos are trying to kill two birds with one stone by shooting up vehicles on the road to Luang Prabang: "They can show their paymasters that they are still alive and kicking, and at the same time loot goodies from the vehicles they attack."

Another plausible explanation for the attacks is that the Hmong in the northern highlands are, for the first time in years, feeling the writ of the Vientiane government. This is causing friction, leading to violent incidents.

For years, the Hmong in Phou Bia were left more or less alone. They carried their weapons and used them whenever government patrols ventured too close—which wasn't often. "But with economic development coming to Laos, this has changed," says a Western diplomat in Vientiane. "The new road to Luang Prabang is just one example. There is now gold exploration in the Hmong stronghold of Phou Bia itself, and the authorities are doing surveys in the area to build hydroelectric power stations."

The Hmong have also come under other pressures. Vientiane has said it intends to resettle as many as 800,000 Hmong and other highlanders in the valleys as a means of ending slash-and-burn farming in the hills and to eradicate opium production. These steps are bound to further alienate Laos's many non-lowland nationalities. All in all, a combination of factors has led to a situation where the country's internal security has once again become a serious concern. ■