

40,000 REPORTED HELD IN HARSH LAOS CAMPS

Witnesses Talk of Food Shortages, Forced Labor and Many Deaths

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 10—Thousands of former rightist and neutralist Laotians are confined in harsh and repressive internment camps scattered throughout Laos, according to accounts being received here.

The reports, provided mainly in interviews from escaped or released prisoners and from letters from within the camps sent to relatives in Laos, said that the camps differed widely in their levels of severity.

Some of them on islands near the capital, Vientiane, are apparently short-term "re-education" facilities to provide such former "undesirables" as prostitutes and wayward teen-agers with Communist indoctrination. These camps have been visited by foreign diplomats and journalists.

But 40,000 to 50,000 former members of the anti-Communist army units in Laos are said to be confined to what amount to forced labor camps, living on minimal food and medicine rations. These former soldiers are reportedly used at such heavy-labor tasks as cutting lumber and building canals, and the death rate is said to be high. These labor camps were set up following the takeover last December by the pro-Communist Pathet Lao and the collapse of the neutralist government, which was supported by rightists and was led by Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma.

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The former Prime Minister, who is not in good health, lives comfortably in Vientiane but has no influence on the Government headed by President Souvanouphong and Prime Minister Yaysone Phomvihane, the Pathet Lao's secretary general.

American officials said that in September Mr. Souvanna Phouma received medical treatment in Paris, where he also visited one of his sons who had fled the country, then returned to Laos.

The most repressive conditions, according to the reports, are at Phongsali, Samneua and Attapu, all long-time Pathet Lao strongholds used for internment of those high-ranking civil servants and military men of the former government who had not succeeded in escaping before the Communist takeover.

Escape Attempts Punished

Conditions are also described as "brutal" and overcrowded for political prisoners at Samkhe, in Vientiane Province, where 750 to 1,000 are reported incarcerated. The reports state that those attempting to escape either from the camps or prisons are subject to execution.

The United States Government has received many of these reports but is reluctant to discuss conditions in the camps publicly for fear that the Laotian authorities may retaliate against the staff of 25 still at the American Embassy in Vientiane, which serves as a listening point on Communist activities in Indochina. There are no American missions in Vietnam or Cambodia.

There have been only fragmentary newspaper accounts of the camps in Laos. Many articles have been written on the fairly mild "re-education" camps near Vientiane, but virtually nothing about the more repressive camps. One report did receive wide circulation earlier in the year when about 500 prisoners were said to have escaped from Samkhe prison.

'Re-education' in Vietnam

Earlier there were reports of a network of "re-education" camps in Vietnam. There, following the takeover of the South by the North Vietnamese in April 1975, almost every soldier or civil servant or prominent personality of the former government was said to have spent some time in such a camp.

Sources here estimate that 100,000 to 300,000 Vietnamese are still in the camps, which are generally off-limits to foreigners. Conditions at the worst of those camps are believed to be somewhat harsher than the worst in Laos.

The death rate is reportedly high because of the poor diet and lack of medical attention. The worst aspect is said to be the psychological, with many people uncertain how long they will have to spend in the camps.

In both Laos and Vietnam, inmates are required to engage in heavy labor, with the food ration about one bowl of rice a day. Malaria and dysentery are said to be endemic. Prisoners are reportedly required to listen to hours of political indoctrination at night, for the most part attacks against the "imperialists," mainly the United States, and, in some areas, Thailand and France.

3-Year Terms in Vietnam

The Vietnamese have officially said the "re-education camp" term lasts only three years and it is expected that certain skilled people such as doctors and engineers may be released earlier.

The Laotians have not publicized their camps as have the Vietnamese and there is less information, although the amount and reliability has apparently increased in recent months.

Conditions in Cambodia were said to be the worst in Indochina after the Communist takeover in 1975, but apparently there has been a gradual improvement there as food has become more available. But the death toll caused by the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh and marches to rural areas was believed very high. As far as is known, all former members of the anti-Communist government who remained in Cambodia have been killed.