

# Laos: It's easier to forget

**W**ho remembers Laos? As an independent country, even as a place, this former Buddhist nation set in the hills and mountains of central Indochina has all but vanished from our consciousness.

Laos was, liberals told us, one of the dominos that would not fall to the "agrarian reformers" of North Vietnam. But it did. Today 50,000 Vietnamese troops garrison Laos while, to the south, 180,000 Vietnamese occupy Cambodia. Only the bayonets of Vietnam's huge army keep the puppet regimes of these captive nations in power.

Cambodia — or Kampuchea — has become something of a cult concern in the West thanks to the film, *The Killing Fields*. But Laos, bereft of such trendy attention, has been utterly forgotten. Hanoi's long-cherished dream of "Greater Vietnam" is virtually a reality thanks to its one-million-man army and massive Soviet aid.

Yet somehow, almost incredibly, Lao resistance against Vietnamese imperialism still continues. Deep in the rugged hill country of northern and central Laos, the little guerrilla army of the legendary General Vang Pao fights on, a decade after the U.S. abandoned Indochina to Vietnam.

Most of the Vang Pao's 10,000 troops are Montagnard tribesmen — Humong people, as they are more properly known. Natives of the wild uplands of Laos and Vietnam, the Montagnards are despised by lowland Viets and Laos as savage primitives. But to the U.S. Green Beret who forged the Montagnards into a deadly fighting force, these fierce little men were the bravest and most loyal fighters in Indochina.

For almost a decade, Vang Pao's army of Montagnards and Laos defended the strategic Plain of Jars and seriously harassed communist communications along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Montagnards utterly trusted their Green Beret and CIA advisers.

Then, in 1975, a war-weary U.S. simply cut and ran, abandoning the Montagnards to the savagry of their old Vietnamese foes. Montagnard villages

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were napalmed and shelled, fields were burned and peasants herded into concentration camps. Many hill villages were showered with "yellow rain," deadly mycotoxins developed as a new germ weapon by the Soviet Union. Poison gas was used against other Montagnard civilians in what became a terrible prelude to the genocide of Afghanistan.

Against such daunting odds, Vang Pao's men keep fighting on, ambushing Viet and Lao convoys and river traffic or attacking enemy outposts. Like Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, Vang Pao's United Lao Liberation Front receives some military and financial aid from China, but not enough to make a decisive military difference.

During a recent visit to Washington last December, Gen. Vang Pao claimed convincingly that given more arms he could double the number of troops in his army. Congress, which this year lavished more than \$3 billion (U.S.) on military aid to Israel and Egypt could not, as usual, find so much as a dime for Vang Pao's anti-communist army.

I suppose Vang Pao should not have been surprised: A Congress too timid to do anything about Soviet tanks and guns pouring into Nicaragua — 800 miles south of Florida — is unlikely to support a forgotten little war thousands of miles away in that land of terrible memories, Indochina.

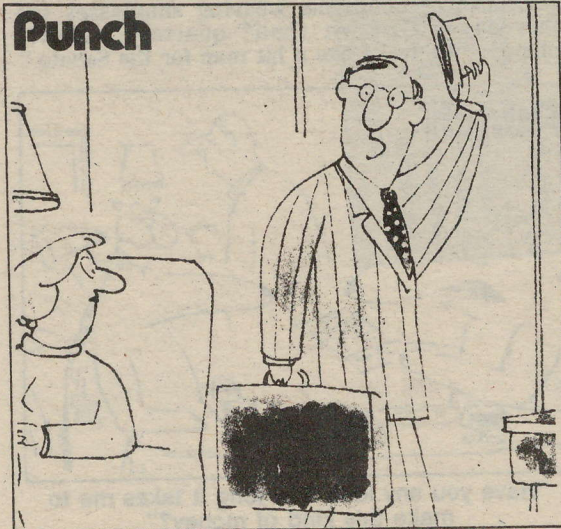
It's too bad that all of the western world's TV teams seem to be in South Africa. I wish people here could see some footage of the Montagnard people vomiting blood as toxins destroyed their lungs or pictures of whole villages incinerated by napalm, white phosphorous and new Soviet fire bombs that burn for hours.

As in Afghanistan, the communists make special targets of journalists so not many intrepid reporters venture into the Lao hills.

Western hysteria over South Africa and media-hyped terrorism conveniently diverts attention away from the infinitely greater horrors and crimes that happen daily in Afghanistan, Laos and Cambodia. No news, in the communist world, is good news. You won't hear the pink prelates of the United Church preaching about poison gas in Laos. If an event is not on our TV screens, it simply does not happen.

What can we do to help the Montagnards and Laos fight for their freedom? Very little. If the Canadian government had any guts, which it certainly does not, it could at least send medical supplies and doctors to help the frightful suffering of the Montagnard people. But that might irritate Vietnam and the Soviets.

Better to do nothing about Laos. Forget the Cambodians. Helping them means really doing something. Easier — and safer — to blast South Africa. Easier to hunt yesterday's Nazis than do something about today's Asian Nazis from Vietnam.



"I'm leaving you, Nora. The company has transferred me to another wife."