

Hill tribes hold the key to security

By MARTIN STUART-FOX

THEY HAVE been ignored for centuries, reviled and treated as savages by the more advanced peoples of the area. No one knows how many there are, but they are spread across every country in South-East Asia and up into southern China.

They are a potential source of strength or weakness and the governments of the region are belatedly realising that they have become increasingly important for the security of the area.

"They" are the hill tribes, called by the French the Montagnards, or mountain people. They are divided into more than 50 tribes by linguistic and social differences. They form no monolithic block and the people of one tribe have little or nothing to do with the members of a neighboring tribe.

The communists were the first to realise the potential value of the hill tribes. Without the help and support of tribal groups, General Giap would have found his task considerably more difficult during his mountain campaigns in the first Indo-China war and at the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

The French also realised that they must win over the Montagnards and French guerrillas worked effectively with roving bands of tribesmen deep into Vietminh-controlled areas.

A French Army pamphlet on the Montagnards describes them collectively as "loyal, honest, sincere, sensitive, suspicious and fearful of the Vietnamese; unsuited to regimentation; averse to coercion; natural hunters and jungle fighters." Most Americans who have worked with the Montagnards in Vietnam and Laos would readily agree.

to the South Vietnamese and the Americans as sources of intelligence on the movements of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units through southern Laos and into Cambodia. The tribes recognise no international boundaries and many tribes extend into these neighboring countries.

In Laos, at least in the north, the picture is more encouraging. There the Meo tribes have allied themselves with the Royal Lao Government and have developed a healthy hatred for the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. The Meo are supplied and trained by the Americans and commanded by their own officers.

In northern Laos it is the Meo who control the mountains and ridges, harassing communist supply lines and attacking isolated Pathet Lao outposts. American helicopter bases Meo territory are used for the rescue of downed pilots in North Vietnam.

But in the south of Laos the Montagnards who live along the Ho Chi Minh trail have thrown in their lot with the Pathet Lao. They are ably led by a Montagnard communist general. American and Lao observation and sabotage teams operating against the trail have to contend with the tribesmen as well as the North Vietnamese.

The Montagnards of this area are known collectively as the "kha" by the Lao.

Literally translated this means "slave" and gives a fair idea of the Lao attitudes towards these people and of what drove them to join the communists.

There has been no reported communist activity to date on the Thai-Burmese border.

In the far north and north-west this frontier is patrolled by fiercely anti-communist remnants of the Kuomintang armies that fled from China in 1949. The Thais tolerate their presence there for this reason.

Northern Thailand provides a sanctuary for rebellious groups of tribesmen in open revolt

nards in Vietnam and Laos would readily agree.

Ethnically the various tribes can be roughly divided into five major groups, although the relationships of some of the tribes are far from clear. There are the Malayo-Polynesian group in South Vietnam and north-eastern Cambodia speaking languages allied to Malay and Tagalog, the principal language of the Philippines.

In the same area but also stretching up into southern Laos are the Mon-Khmer tribes speaking languages similar to present day Cambodian. Then there are the Tibeto-Burman tribes, including the Karen and Kachin in Burma and the Akha, Lisu and Lahu in northern Thailand.

An important group of tribes, including the Meo, Yao and Nung, are ethnically related to the Chinese and migrated from Yunnan over the past couple of hundred years. These tribes are the principal opium growers in south-east Asia, and are found in North Vietnam, southern China, Laos and northern Thailand.

The last group are the tiny pockets of primitive regritos such as the extremely shy Yambri of Thailand and the aboriginal inhabitants of the Malay peninsula now found only in the Central Malayan Highlands.

The Montagnards have very little sense of identity with anyone outside their own village. A few have a well-developed tribal identity but none thinks of himself as a citizen of the State in which he lives.

In South Vietnam, for instance, the only thing that unites the hill tribes at all and gives them any form of political cohesion is their dislike for and distrust of the Vietnamese.

The Montagnards suspect the Vietnamese of wanting, if not to exterminate them, then at least to destroy their cultural identity, assimilate them as second-class citizens and confiscate their land for Vietnamese settlement.

The South Vietnamese, for their part, think of and treat the tribesmen as savages and have done virtually nothing for them since the country became independent in 1954.

They do not recognise Montagnard ownership of tribal lands and have displaced many tribesmen to resettle Vietnamese refugees.

The only group in South Vietnam to have appreciated the worth of the Montagnards as fighters and sources of intelligence on communist movements is the American Special Forces. The "Green Berets" have won the confidence of the tribesmen and used them in a military role.

In contrast the North Vietnamese have complete units of crack Montagnard soldiers and one of their top generals is a tribesman. In Laos the Meo guerrilla leader, Major-General Vang Pao, is in command of Lao as well as Meo troops. In South Vietnam there has never been a Montagnard general and there is never likely to be one if the present policy continues.

Properly trained, the Montagnards could be of great use

Northern Thailand provides a sanctuary for rebellious groups of tribesmen in open revolt against the Burmese Government. North of Fang, within a few miles of the Burmese, one group of Karen is commanded by an ex-major, British Army trained, who is accompanied everywhere by his personal batman.

The Thai Government turns a blind eye to what is going on in the north. In any case, it is almost powerless to stop the gun-running from Laos to rebels in Burma or to expel dissident tribal groups from its borders. But the large Shan and Karen minorities in Thailand, although they are sympathetic to their cousins across the border, want to remain in the comparative peace and prosperity of Thailand and are not going to do anything that will provoke a Thai Government reaction.

The three principal tribal groups in Burma, the Shan, Karen and Kachin, are the most politically sophisticated of the hill tribes. For years British and American missionaries worked among them, educating them in their own languages and improving their living standards.

The Burmese Government is determined to preserve the Union of Burma and not allow the tribes to break away to form separate States. Recently the Government has had some success in negotiations with the tribes, but it is difficult to know what the true situation is since the Burmese are very wary of allowing journalists into their country.

Throughout this area there is continued migration of tribal peoples across the existing international boundaries. These migrations may be a result of the political environment or may simply be part of the continual search for new land to till, a result of population pressures, the traditional movement of peoples down the South-East Asian peninsula.

Since the tribes have become caught up in the ideological conflict sweeping South-East Asia they have been forced to take account of the 20th century. Assimilation is predictably slow, but there are few tribesmen who still prefer the cross-bow or blow-gun to a carbine or rifle.

The communists have a head start in their treatment of the tribal minorities. In both China and North Vietnam the tribesmen have been granted semi-autonomous areas, which are, of course, still rigidly controlled by the communists but which at least go some way towards satisfying tribal demands.

The communists have also established universities, schools and hospitals for the minorities and have concentrated on helping them diversify their agriculture.

Every so often New China News Agency broadcasts a report of another project completed to benefit the minorities.

Unless the governments of South-East Asia do likewise the problem of internal security and control of communist propaganda and insurgency will be all the harder.