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Source: *Southeast Asian Affairs*, Southeast Asian Affairs (1984), pp. 179-194

Published by: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27908502>

Accessed: 16-06-2015 02:48 UTC

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LAOS IN 1983 A Time of Consolidation

Martin Stuart-Fox

Judging by the coverage Laos received in the international press during 1983, the country passed the year in a state of somnolent tranquillity. Even the Thai newspapers, long renowned for their tendentious reporting of events in Laos, carried relatively few headlines on anti-government resistance or shooting incidents on the Mekong. Yet again in 1983 the situation in Kampuchea, and Vietnam's relations with China and the five members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), overshadowed anything that occurred in Laos. Even on the principal occasion when Laos was in the news, when it acted as host nation to the summit meeting of the heads of the communist parties and governments of the three Indochinese states, Kampuchea remained the centre of interest.

That Laos did not attract the attention or interest of the rest of the world during 1983 was hardly of concern, however, to the nation's leaders. The year provided a needed opportunity to consolidate political power and pursue the direction and goals set by the Third Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) held in April 1982. In fact consolidation was the principal theme sounded by both the Party and the government once the Third Congress had set the seal on the important changes in both political line and economic policy introduced in the Seventh Resolution of the Supreme People's Assembly and Council of Ministers of December 1979 and the first five-year plan as set out in the Eighth Resolution of January 1981.

Consolidation was evident in a number of areas, of which two were of paramount importance: consolidation of political control internally, and consolidation of the so-called Indochina Solidarity Bloc with Vietnam and Kampuchea externally. Moves in both of these areas will be examined; the former in conjunction with the economic situation and continued opposition to the regime on the part of anti-government resistance groups; the latter in the context of the overall spectrum of Lao foreign relations.

Political Consolidation

For the Lao regime, 1983 marked the first year of implementation of the resolutions of the Third Congress of the LPRP. Early in the new year appointments to the expanded Council of Ministers were announced, a reorganization of government to match the earlier reorganization of the Party. Kaysone Phomvihane retained his position as Prime Minister, with the ageing Souvanna Phouma still symbolically Counsellor to the government.* Nouhak Phoumsavan continued as Vice-Premier in overall charge of the economy, though he relinquished the Finance Ministry to Gnao Phonevantha, formerly Director of the Department of the Budget. Phoumi Vongvichit continued as Vice-Premier with responsibility for education, health, and culture, with Kharntai Siphandon as Vice-Premier and Minister of Defence, and the ailing Phoun Sipaseut Vice-Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs. The major promotion was of the fast rising Sali Vongkhamso, President

*Souvanna died in January 1984.

of the State Planning Committee, to Vice-Premier in charge of planning. Sali was ranked eighth behind the seven members of the Politburo in the expanded Central Committee of the LPRP elected at the Third Congress, and thus must be seen as the principal contender to take Phoun Sipaseut's place in the Politburo should ill health force Phoun to step aside.

Two things are noteworthy about the reorganization of the Ministry: the first is that all the new portfolios have to do with the economy, and serve to stress the importance being given to economic development and implementation of the first five-year plan; the second is that the new ministers, all men of proven ability, are either technocrats or soldiers. Technocrats have also been promoted to a number of vice-ministerial positions. Military influence within the government has clearly increased. The powerful General Sisavat Keobounphan retains the Interior portfolio, with General Khamphon Boudakharn as the new Minister of Construction and Colonel Phao Bounnaphon, commander of the Wattay airbase at Vientiane, as Minister of Transport and Communications. Both new ministers are alternate members of the LPRP Central Committee. General Inkong Mahavong, newly appointed to head the key Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Co-operatives, is a full member of the Central Committee.

Other new faces in the Ministry include Vanthong Sengmuong, former Lao Ambassador in Moscow, as Minister of Commerce; Thongsouk Saisangkhi, as Minister of Materials and Technology; Khamlieng Pholsena as Minister of Public Health (replacing Souk Vongsak, who died in February 1983 after a long illness); and Bountiem Pitsamai as Minister of Education. Kou Souvannarmethi remained as Minister of Justice, while former Trade and Industry Minister Maisouk Saisompheng stayed on with reduced responsibility for Industry, Handicrafts, and Forestry. Former Information Minister Sisana Sisane became Minister of Culture, a portfolio including sport and religion.

Presidents of five State Committees also have ministerial rank. In addition to State Planning these committees include: the State Bank Committee (where Boutsabong Souvannavong replaces Soth Phetrasi as President); the State Information, Newspapers, Radio and Television Committee (with Thongsing Thammavong as President); the State Social Welfare and War Veterans Committee (President, Mun Somvichit); and the Ethnic Affairs Committee (where the Hmong leader Nhaiavu Lobliayao retains his position). Several displaced ministers have been given nominal appointments: Soth Phetrasi in charge of maps and border demarcation; Ma Khaykhamphithoune, former Chairman of the State Planning Committee, as Minister of Special Missions; and former Agriculture Minister Khamssouk Sayaseng in charge of promoting tobacco production. Despite their demotions, the latter two retained their positions in the LPRP Central Committee.¹

The government reshuffle served to confirm the pragmatic direction adopted by the Third Party Congress. This was confirmed at the Third Plenary Session of the LPRP held early in the new year expressly to put into effect the resolutions of the Congress for 1983. Emphasis was placed on improving conditions of life for all Lao through increased agricultural production and small-scale industry and handicrafts. A draft plan for economic and social development during 1983 was presented to the annual joint sitting of the Supreme People's Assembly and Council of Ministers in early February, together with a report on progress during 1982, the second year of the five-year plan. Both reports were presented by Sali Vongkhamsoa, incidentally confirming his enhanced status within the Lao leadership hierarchy. The new Finance Minister Gnao Phonevantha delivered a report on 1982 income and expenditure and presented current budget estimates for 1983. For the first time since the regime took power in 1975, Kaysone did

¹ The full list of personnel in the new government was released by the Lao Embassy in Bangkok on 12 January 1983 (*Foreign Broadcast Information Service: Asia and Pacific, Daily Report* [hereafter cited as FBIS:AP], 13 January 1983).

not deliver a political report, doubtless because his report to the Third Party Congress was considered sufficient to set the policy guidelines for 1983.

Party reorganization was taken as a priority following the Third Party Congress, particularly in those parts of the country designated "white bases" where there was no Party presence at all. An editorial in *Sieng Pasason*, official organ of the LPRP, stated: "The proletarian dictatorship needs to be consolidated and . . . the organization of the Party [needs] to be expanded more widely" (19 March 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 30 March 1983). In a later editorial on Party structure and the role of the Party in Lao political life, the paper called for more attention to be given to "the grassroots level [in order] to build socialist strongholds". This was necessary to strengthen the Party's political foundations and administrative power, which was essential if the Party was to fulfil its role of encouraging the people to appreciate fully its political line and policy, the editorial stated. Restructuring of the Party would improve security in the countryside, and strengthen the "collective mastership" of the people as exercised through Party-controlled mass organizations. The Party was called upon to become "more effective in work training and education", but was congratulated for "having creatively applied Marxism-Leninism to the reality of Laos" (*Sieng Pasason*, 23 March 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 23 March 1983).

Party reorganization and consolidation was pursued both through visits paid by central Party officials to provincial centres, and through national congresses of mass organizations. Kaysone himself visited the southern provinces of Attapeu, Saravane, and Champassak to "supervise and guide" the implementation of the resolutions of the Third Party Congress (Radio Vientiane, 18 March 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 21 March 1983). He also attended the provincial Party Congress in Xieng Khouang, where he stressed the need to promote unity among the multi-ethnic population. Other Party leaders and members of the Central Committee were equally active in strengthening contacts between the provinces and the Party centre.

For the first time in 1983, national congresses were held of the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union (LPRYU) and the Patriotic Lao Women's Association. The former took place in Vientiane in April, and provided a forum for Kaysone's wife, Thongvin Phomvihane, who delivered a report on revised statutes to the conference and was elected Assistant First Secretary of the LPRYU. This followed her earlier election as full member of the LPRP Central Committee, and confirmed her rising status in the Party hierarchy.² The congress was opened by Interior Minister Sisavat Keobounphan, President of the LPRYU's mobilizing committee, but elected Central Committee member Thongsavat Khaikhamphitoun as First Secretary of the Union. The congress, which brought together 245 delegates from all provinces (representing 115,000 members, double the number in 1978), heard Kaysone stress the need to build up the country-wide organization of the LPRYU in order to train the next generation of Lao youth to carry on the nation's revolutionary ideals. By study combined with practice, Lao youth were to forge themselves into the new socialist men of the future, Kaysone told delegates, and he called for a spirit of self-reliance and renunciation of the "old ways" of private living, idleness, sexual pleasure, and luxury. The nation's youth were to become "shock troops" in carrying forward the "three revolutions" (in relation to production, science and technology, and culture and ideology), and in countering the destructive schemes and sabotage conducted through the collusion of American imperialism with Chinese expansionism and hegemonism.³

The first National Congress of the Patriotic Lao Women's Association was held in

² A long biography of Thongvin Phomvihane was published in *Mengn Lao* on 8 October 1982 (see *Joint Publications Research Service, Southeast Asia Report* [hereafter cited as *JPRS*] no. 1246). Thongvin was also interviewed at length by *Sieng Pasason* just prior to the Congress (broadcast over Vientiane Radio, 16 February 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 25 February 1983).

³ Kaysone's speech was carried by Radio Vientiane on 27 April 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 3 May 1983).

Vientiane towards the end of June. It too heard speeches calling for improved organization to reach all Lao women. Party and state officials "in many areas" were castigated for having "failed to concentrate on organizing, rallying, educating, training and creating favorable conditions for women to carry out their activities". Officials at all levels were instructed to include women more in the "daily political life" of the nation.⁴

Other major meetings where the opportunity was taken to press for improved Party organization with a view to carrying out the twin tasks of national construction and defence were the 28th anniversary celebrations for the LPRP, the annual meeting of the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), and the rallies and political seminars held to mark the 100th anniversary of the death of Karl Marx. The principal slogan for the LPRP anniversary celebration was "Consolidate the Party", and the masses were called upon "positively to take part in the building of the party" (Radio Vientiane, 17 March 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 18 March 1983). A decision was taken at this time to change the name of the Party journal *Sieng Pasason* (meaning "The Voice of the People") to *Pasason* (The People). This accompanied a change in format to make the paper more accessible to the mass of the population. Readers' letters were henceforth to be published and queries answered, and there would be more feature articles on politics and literature. The Party appealed to all Lao "to regard *Pasason* as their own paper and use it as a platform [on] all issues within the nation" (*Khaosan Pathet Lao*, 24 March 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 23 March 1983). But the appeal apparently fell on deaf ears, for two months later the Central Committee Secretariat complained that the paper was not being properly appreciated. Instead of being carefully preserved to be regularly read by cadres, it was often used as wallpaper and to wrap things. Some provinces were accused of failing to subscribe to the paper for distribution to the masses, and many agricultural co-operatives did not receive it. Provincial centres were instructed to subscribe immediately and to arrange for the paper to be widely distributed and read out over loudspeakers (Radio Vientiane, 24 May 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 26 May 1983).

Delegates to the LFNC enlarged meeting held in March were reminded of the resolution of the Third Party Congress calling upon the Front to involve itself in the mobilization and political education of the masses. The aim should be "to consolidate and improve the organization of the Front, to broaden it and to increase the participation of all tribal peoples". Front officials were called upon to organize political and ideological refresher seminars as a first stage in this programme (Radio Vientiane, 31 March 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 1 April 1983). Whether or not this renewed emphasis on organization and political mobilization would be effective remained to be seen, but the intention was clear.

The centenary of Marx's death provided another opportunity to stress political education and instruct all and sundry in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. A series of three-month courses on Marxism-Leninism was held for schoolteachers throughout the year. Each round brought some sixty teachers from every province to be instructed in Marxist philosophy, political economy, scientific socialism, socialist economic management, and the political line of the LPRP on education in the current phase of the Lao revolution.⁵ Special two-week courses on Marxism-Leninism were also held for hundreds of Lao women, while the usual political seminars for all sectors of the community stressed the importance of Marx's ideas and the resolutions of the Third Party Congress in equivalent measure.

The State of the Economy

The emphasis on carrying out the first five-year plan for economic development continued to be placed on agriculture, with forestry and handicrafts as important

⁴ See the broadcast over Vientiane Radio, 25 June 1983 (*JPRS* 1315).

⁵ *Khaosan Pathet Lao*, Bulletin Quotidien, 2 July 1983, p. 5.

additional sectors of production. The 1983 plan for social and economic development delivered by Sali Vongkhamsao to the annual joint sitting of the Supreme People's Assembly and Council of Ministers has not been made public. Nor have the budget estimates for 1983. However, some production goals have been revealed. For example, *Pasason* published the following targets for 1983 set by the Third Plenum of the Central Committee: rice — 1.2 million tons; cattle — 1.4 million heads; pigs — 1.25 million; irrigated land area to increase by 10 per cent; and agricultural co-operatives to be consolidated and extended, with new co-operatives being established "where conditions prevail".⁶ Each agricultural labourer is expected to be producing at least 350 kg. of rice and starch crops by 1985.

These goals compare with published figures for 1982 as follows: rice — 1,080,000 tons (5 per cent below target and a 1 per cent drop on the 1981 harvest due to crop damage in four provinces); coffee — up 17.6 per cent over 1981; tobacco — up 18.44 per cent; peanuts — up 16.22 per cent; soya beans — up 22.34 per cent; buffaloes — 897,100 (a rise of 5.77 per cent on 1980); pigs — 1,232,000 (a rise of 17.07 per cent); sheep and goats — 56,100 (up 15.43 per cent); and poultry — 5,813,000 (up 27.41 per cent on 1980).⁷ *Pravda* reported overall increases in the seven years since the present regime took power of 43 per cent in gross domestic product, and 40 per cent in per capita national income. The area of cultivated land has reportedly increased by one-third, while the area of irrigated land has doubled (12,000 additional hectares in 1982). The number of workers has increased by 200,000.⁸

In the forestry sector, 1982 reportedly saw timber production increase 80 per cent, but most of this is believed to have been exported to socialist bloc countries. However, the signing of a five-year contract with a Thai-Hong Kong consortium for the extraction of timber from the flood area of the Nam Ngum hydroelectric dam should increase returns in hard currency. Meanwhile, reafforestation of hardwoods continued during 1982, with an increased area of replanting envisaged for 1983. So far a total of 135,000 young trees have been planted since 1976, and the goal is eventually for an additional 50,000 trees to be planted each year. Timber production is slated to increase to 400,000 cubic metres annually.⁹

Figures on numbers of co-operatives continued to be contradictory. While *Vientiane Mai* reported the existence of 1,700 co-operatives comprising 20 per cent of all farming families, *Pasason* gave a figure of 1,943 co-operatives (of which no fewer than 591 were newly established in 1982) covering 17.9 per cent of farming families, but 20 per cent of total cultivated land. Five months later *Pasason* had reduced the total to a round figure of 1,900 comprising 17 per cent of farming families.¹⁰ What seems clear is that co-operativization of agriculture remains a priority concern for the government, but the policy is still meeting considerable resistance. In February, the Party called for a stepped-up programme to achieve complete co-operativization of agriculture by 1984/85. Each province was instructed to formulate a "guiding plan" for the establishment of co-operatives, preferably just before the wet-rice season, since rice production is "the best test for the correction and the good of an agricultural cooperative unit" (*Sieng Pasason*, 10 February 1983; *JPRS* 1272). But provincial officials were told to concentrate first on improving established co-operatives and to prevent their breakup through poor

⁶ *Pasason*, 1 April 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 25 April 1983). Late rains, and the possibility of a semi-drought make it unlikely that agricultural production goals will be met.

⁷ *Khaosan Pathet Lao*, 15 December 1982 (*JPRS* 1241) and *Sieng Pasason*, 17 December 1982 (*JPRS* 1251).

⁸ *Pravda* (Moscow), 2 December 1982, in an article commemorating the seventh anniversary of the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (*JPRS* 1241).

⁹ *Sieng Pasason*, 22 October 1982 (*JPRS* 1235); 1982 production to that date was given as 70,074 cubic metres.

¹⁰ *Vientiane Mai*, 20 December 1982 (*JPRS* 1254); *Sieng Pasason*, 1 January 1983 (*JPRS* 1261); *Pasason*, 23 May 1983 (*JPRS* 1315).

planning. Proper political education was essential if members were to withstand "enemy propaganda"; as was the proper training of co-operative cadres in management and production techniques. Above all, *Vientiane Mai* stressed, voluntarism had to be respected, together with the interests of members and proper democratic management. If this were done, not only would production increase, but implementation of the three revolutions in the rural areas would be furthered.¹¹

According to the Ministry of Industry, Handicrafts, and Forestry, overall industrial production rose by 23.79 per cent in 1982 compared with the previous year, perhaps reflecting the additional payments being made to workers for over-target production. Electricity output rose by 3.29 per cent while sales to Thailand increased by 11.37 per cent. Power distribution also increased 13.06 per cent above targets set in the five-year plan, earning the Lao Electricity Company a personal message of congratulation from Kaysone himself (*Sieng Pasason*, 7 January 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 10 January 1983). Tin production was up by 30.10 per cent, though total production probably amounted to no more than 450 tons from reserves estimated at as much as 65,000 tons. Low production was due to the fact that seven years after nationalization, mining machinery was still being replaced with Soviet assistance. Textile production increased by 33.27 per cent over 1981, while other light industries, including pottery, handicrafts, electric wire, plastic bags, and laundry detergent, also increased output (*Sieng Pasason*, 20 December 1982; *JPRS* 1259).

Trade registered mixed results for 1982. While internal trade surpassed target figures by a massive 95.3 per cent despite transportation and communication difficulties, foreign trade failed to meet goals set in the five-year plan. Internal trade flourished due to the increased activity of state stores, the wider range of products for sale, and the greater quantities of corn, rice bran, fresh meat, coffee, skins, and forest products bought in exchange. But above all the increase was due to the extent of private commerce. Foreign exports reached an estimated US\$46 million, with imports at US\$115 million, leaving a deficit of US\$75 million (compared to a US\$92 million deficit in 1981). Most trade was with the Socialist bloc, but trade with Thailand also increased. Imports from Thailand rose from US\$14.5 million in 1977 to US\$42.1 million five years later. For the first six months of 1983 the figure was US\$23.6 million, a sum not covered even by the sharply increased value of electricity sold to Thailand. To make the trade imbalance worse, goods smuggled into Laos from Thailand were estimated to be worth US\$14 million to US\$15 million annually.¹²

Greatly increased private commerce brought with it some serious problems. New regulations on trading practices introduced by the government in July were designed to counter such malpractices as smuggling, profiteering, formation of monopolies, the failure of private traders to conform to the Party line, stealing of state goods, failure to pay taxes, and placing pressure on farmers to sell surplus production to private traders instead of to state shops. Despite this catalogue of crimes, the Party journal *Pasason*, stated that it still remained the policy of the government to make increased use of private traders, both to reach areas where the state trading service was unavailable, and to act as distribution and purchasing agents for the state. Pointing to the urgent need to regularize marketing controls in order to stabilize commodity prices, the journal urged all private traders to consider not simply their own personal interests, but primarily those of the state and the people. And *Pasason* added that Party cadres should educate private traders

¹¹ *Vientiane Mai*, 9 and 11 April 1983 (*JPRS* 1314); newspapers continued to stress the benefits of co-operative farming, and to assist in educating cadres. For example, *Sieng Pasason* on 1 February 1983 (*JPRS* 1272) gave a detailed account of how income was allocated in the Ban Latmgon co-operative on the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang province. And on 3 February 1983, the benefits of mechanization were extolled in an article entitled "Our beloved tractor" (*JPRS* 1274).

¹² For trade figures, see *Quarterly Economic Review of Indochina: Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia*, Annual Supplement, 1983, p. 24, and Nayan Chanda, "Partly Back to Life", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 25 August 1983, pp. 36-37.

and transform them so that they "gradually . . . switch to production . . . of small industries, processing industries, and handicrafts" (20 July 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 26 July 1983). This suggested that private commerce was, in the eyes of the Party ideologues, a temporary expedient: energy and initiative should be directed into more productive fields.

New regulations on foreign trade introduced tighter currency controls. Private importers henceforth will have to cover the cost of purchases from foreign companies by depositing sufficient hard currency to cover the transaction with the Lao Bank of Foreign Trade. Payment will be made exclusively through the Bank, which will issue official documents to the importer. Any trader selling foreign goods without the required proof of purchase will be open to prosecution.

New financial arrangements will hopefully permit the government to tap remittances from Lao refugees abroad as a source of foreign exchange. At present, money from abroad is usually either sent to a Thai bank in Nong Khai, across the Mekong from Vientiane, or mailed as a bank draft which is then cashed, for a high commission, by traders who obtain payment for the draft in Thailand and smuggle the money back into Laos in Thai baht. Remittances to the sum of US\$1 million made through the National Bank in 1982 are believed to be only a fraction of the estimated total sum remitted from abroad. In June 1983, in order to make payment through official channels more attractive, the government established a special exchange rate of 108 kip to the U.S. dollar for private transactions. As the official exchange rate remains about a third of the black market rate, this effective devaluation reveals the lengths to which the government is prepared to go in order to obtain access to hard currency. One reason for this concern is that increased trade with the Socialist bloc seems likely to reduce hard currency earnings to the point where Laos may soon have difficulty servicing its external debt to international lenders.¹³

The government continued to have difficulty balancing the budget in 1983. Income came primarily from state trading, agricultural and other taxes, and foreign aid. After a shaky start early in the harvest, the collection of agricultural tax in the form of rice picked up, netting the government 35,317 tons. A further 44,899 tons were purchased from farmers (Radio Vientiane, 5 June 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 14 June 1983). Foreign aid came mainly from the Socialist bloc. State Planning Committee President Sali Vongkhamsoa led a high-powered delegation of the Lao Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation to East Germany, Bulgaria, Mongolia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union in the middle of the year. Protocols for assistance were signed with the first four, and with the Soviet Union when a Soviet co-operation delegation visited Vientiane in July. Total Soviet aid provided for the duration of the first Lao five-year plan amounted to "several hundred million rubles" according to former Information Minister, Sisana Sisane (*Sieng Pasason*, 9 December 1982; *JPRS* 1249). Major projects, and their state of completion as at mid-1983, included the Polytechnical College (20 per cent complete), a 150-bed hospital (35 per cent), a 120 kilowatt radio station (20 per cent), a timber processing factory (20 per cent), and a mineral and sand sweeping station (60 per cent). A technical school and prefabricated concrete factory are already in operation (Radio Vientiane, 17 June 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 17 June 1983). Another major Soviet-assisted venture, using mainly Vietnamese workers, is the Vinh to Vientiane oil pipeline, the first stage of which is scheduled for completion by February 1984. This will provide Laos with an initial flow of 170,00 tons of oil per year, later to increase to 220,000 tons and ultimately 300,000 tons per year (*Pasason*, 21 April 1983; *JPRS* 1310).

Vietnamese aid to Laos from 1976 to the end of the first Lao five-year plan in 1985 has been put at 1,334 million dong, half of it a gift and the other half in long-term interest-

¹³ These financial changes are discussed by Chanda, *op. cit.*

free loans.¹⁴ In addition Vietnam is training "thousands" of Lao cadres, more than half of all those currently being educated in Socialist bloc countries. "A great number" of Vietnamese experts are working in Laos, not including military advisers and construction units working on road building projects. The more important of more than a hundred Vietnamese projects in Laos include a cement factory due for completion by the end of 1983, a farm tools factory, a sugar mill, the Khok Hin Keo gypsum mine in Savannakhet province, oil storage depots, repair workshops, and various projects in the provinces, many of them under the twin provinces co-operation scheme. The survey and demarcation of the 2000 km. border between Laos and Vietnam is also all but complete, "basically fulfilling the treaty on border demarcation between the two countries".¹⁵

Financial aid from international bodies amounting to almost US\$25 million was made available in 1983 for agricultural development projects, while bilateral aid was provided by a number of Western countries. The major Western donor, as in previous years, was Sweden which provided a 20.3 million Skr loan for two forestry projects in Paksane province. The Swedes also handed over an oxygen-acetylene plant, and signed a new agreement to provide worker and management training. The plant will produce 4,500 cylinders of oxygen and 700 cylinders of acetylene per year, and employ 33 workers. Smaller amounts of aid were provided by the Netherlands (for a fresh-water fisheries project agreed upon by the International Mekong Committee to produce 300 tons of fish a year), Japan (600 million yen to upgrade the Vientiane water supply), Australia (irrigation equipment), India (cotton material), the United States (medical supplies), and Britain (machinery for the manufacture of furniture).

In addition to taxation and foreign aid the government turned to a new source of budget funding in 1983 — a National Development Lottery to tap increasing wealth in private hands. The lottery was set up under the joint control of the Ministry of Finance and the State Bank, with proceeds going equally to the central government and Vientiane city budgets. Prizes range from a 70 cc motor cycle or a refrigerator valued at 100,000 kip as first prize down to one thousand consolation prizes of 100 kip each. In announcing the new lottery, *Sieng Pasason* pointed out that it was quite different from the illegal lotteries of the former regime which were "not only gambling which poisons and destroys many generations, but were also capitalist exploitation methods". This lottery was of benefit to the whole nation, and everyone was encouraged to buy a ticket (*Sieng Pasason*, 13 January 1983; *JPRS* 1266).

In a sense the National Lottery reflected the success of government economic policies. Relaxation of controls on private commerce has made Vientiane markets the most flourishing in Indochina. In 1983 the government further encouraged private production. Investment was urged in small-scale manufacturing and industry, especially the production of handicrafts and "household goods". Incentives take the form of training assistance, government loans, and tax exemptions. "We must encourage and organize workers' families, government employees and small merchants to turn to handicrafts", *Pasason* enthused (21 April 1983; *JPRS* 1310).

But prosperity and new freedoms brought their own problems, not least of which was how to prevent a return to "capitalist ways". The government decreed restrictions on privately organized parties and "Buddhist activities, social banquets, celebrations, and other ceremonies in Buddhist temples, offices . . . public places, or in private houses". These led to "bad incidents", such as gambling, dancing to raise money, and erotic

¹⁴ *Khaosan Pathet Lao*, Bulletin Quotidien, 5 July 1983.

¹⁵ This information on Vietnamese aid, including the border demarcation, comes from an interview given by Industry Minister Maisouk Saisompheng on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the signing of the Lao-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Radio Vientiane, 18 July 1983 (*FBIS/AP*, 25 July 1983).

dances and songs.¹⁶ Private "cultural troupes" performing at private parties were reminded that they first had to register and gain clearance for their performances from the provincial Culture Control and Inspection Committee. On the other hand, the government hastened to assure people that temple fairs were not being banned, and that authorities had no right to prevent private celebrations in public places, provided a permit was obtained, no loudspeakers were used, no revival of old ways occurred, and the party ended by 10 p.m.

Controls were also introduced on private trade in photographic equipment, records, cassettes, novels, and magazines, again primarily with a view to preventing commerce in eroticism and a revival of "old ways". Private houses had to be registered to prevent landlordism, and the smuggling, hoarding, and black market sale of petroleum products were strictly banned. In June, reports were circulating of the arrest of a number of officials on corruption charges, including interfering with foreign aid projects. Some culprits were reportedly imprisoned, while others were sent to Vietnam for courses on political instruction.¹⁷

Resistance to the Regime

Yet another shadowy resistance organization was reportedly set up in 1983. Known as the Free People League of Laos, it is supposedly based in the south of the country and is linked to the National United Front for the Liberation of Laos (Neo Luam Phalang Kousat), the umbrella organization uniting all resistance groups. The Front reportedly also gained an important adherent when former Lao Ambassador to the United Nations Dr Vitthaya Souriyot defected to the United States, was granted political asylum, and agreed to join the organization as an adviser (*Bangkok Post*, 24 June 1983).

The Front comprises several disparate groups operating out of Thailand along the frontier with Laos. These include the so-called Phoumi Nosavan group claiming to have some 300 men under arms, though a Thai paper, not noted for underestimating Lao anti-government resistance, reported that only three units numbering forty, twenty-four, and ten men owing allegiance to Phoumi, were actually operating in different parts of Savannakhet province. Other groups include Vang Pao's Hmong insurgents of whom few remain active, mainly in Sayaboury and some northern provinces; Kong Le's so-called neutralists, a more substantial force based in southern China, perhaps a thousand strong; a "Khaen Doeng" group, of whom little is known; and a small group owing allegiance to former general Kouprasith Abhay.¹⁸ Despite its limited successes, the Front has grandiose plans to arm and field 4,000 guerrillas and infiltrate them back into Laos. Arms are expected to be provided by the Chinese through Thai and Kampuchean intermediaries. However, the Thai press reported in August that "hundreds" of recent recruits, mainly former rightist soldiers who had fled to Thailand and failed to be accepted for settlement in Third countries, and some two hundred Pathet Lao militia who had defected to the resistance, were still without weapons (*Bangkok Post*, 14 August 1983).

Judging by Thai reports, therefore, it would seem that anti-government resistance groups, despite liaison with Kampuchean insurgents, do not present much of a challenge to the Lao regime. But Lao reports suggest the resistance should not be dismissed out of

¹⁶ *Vientiane Mai*, 28 and 29 January, and 28 March 1983 (*JPRS* 1276 and 1314). The state-owned Vientiane Hotel and Restaurant Corporation reported increased profits of 40 per cent in 1982, mainly from catering for 22 per cent more parties. *Sieng Pasason*, 1 January 1983 (*JPRS* 1264).

¹⁷ *Agence France Presse*, 14 June 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 14 June 1983). Reports that Deputy Minister of Construction Sengkham Phinith was among those arrested were proved groundless when three days later Sengkham was quoted on the progress of Soviet aid projects (*FBIS:AP*, 17 June 1983).

¹⁸ *Matichon* (Bangkok), 8 December 1982 (*JPRS* 1248). For a recent discussion of the Lao resistance, see Geoffrey C. Gunn, "Resistance Coalitions in Laos", *Asian Survey* 23 (1983): 316-40.

hand. The Lao news media constantly warned people during 1983 to be vigilant and on their guard in the face of continued enemy efforts to undermine and overthrow the regime. Radio Vientiane in August warned of enemy infiltrators attempting to destroy the Party leadership, "slander and distort the Party's and state's policies", and alienate the masses from the Party and its organs through deceitful and cunning manoeuvres which were hard to detect. Enemy propaganda campaigns exploiting "certain weaknesses and shortcomings of our cadres and combatants" were aimed at undermining national unity, creating divisions between the centre and the provinces, sowing division between Laos and the Soviet Union, and undermining the special solidarity between Laos, Vietnam, and Kampuchea, the radio warned. Enemy agents bribed cadres and enticed youths to revert to the materialist way of life of the old regime. Unfortunately, the radio conceded, some cadres had fallen for this propaganda "and have resorted to pursuing a decadent way of life by becoming selfish and corrupt" (Radio Vientiane, 2 August 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 4 August 1983). *Pasason*, returning to the same theme, identified the enemy as exiled Lao reactionaries, fed and trained by the Thai in collusion with China and the United States and infiltrated back into Laos to "sabotage, deceive and bribe". Constant vigilance and increased ideological education could alone counter such schemes (*Pasason*, 13 August 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 18 August 1983).

Continued activity by resistance groups was also suggested by Lao reports of militia successes. In Luang Namtha province alone in northwestern Laos local defence forces claimed to have killed 30 insurgents during the first half of 1983, wounded 16, captured 14 more, and seized 18 weapons, 700 rounds of ammunition, grenades, documents, and other military equipment.¹⁹ Another indication of official concern over resistance activity was the effort made in 1983 to recruit more youths into local defence militia. Numbers joining were frequently publicized and volunteers congratulated. Yet another expression of concern came in messages to the Hmong tribal minority on the occasion of their new year celebrations. Both Lao Chief of State Souphanouvong and Hmong leader Faydang Lobliayao warned the Hmong to maintain a "revolutionary vigilance" against attempts by "imperialists and the Beijing reactionary clique" to deceive them into fleeing the country or recruiting them as mercenaries (Radio Vientiane, 13 December 1982; *FBIS:AP*, 14 December 1982). The Chinese, according to another Hmong leader, were still trying to attract the Hmong by claiming they were of Chinese descent, and promising them self rule in an autonomous area once the present Lao regime was overthrown.²⁰

External Relations

China

The People's Republic of China continued to be seen as the primary enemy of the peoples of Indochina, but a curious disparity became evident in 1983 between relations between China and the three Indochina states as a group and bilateral relations between China and Laos. For example, in a discussion of Chinese foreign policy towards the states of Indochina broadcast over Radio Vientiane in May, only perfunctory mention was made of unfriendly Chinese acts against Laos (recruiting of refugees, infiltration of agents into Laos). Lao ire was reserved for Chinese policies towards Vietnam and Kampuchea, and for Chinese attempts to undermine Indochinese solidarity (Radio Vientiane, 5 May 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 6 May 1983). Laos condemned China's "criminal

¹⁹ Radio Vientiane, 30 August 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 30 August 1983). Defence forces in Savannakhet province, where insurgents are more active, were apparently less effective, however. See *Pasason*, 25 April 1983 (*JPRS* 1318). Often conflicting reports are given, for example, Radio Vientiane on 14 and 29 June 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 15 June and 7 July 1983) on the number of enemy soldiers killed, wounded, or captured by local militia during the first half of 1983. But whichever figures are correct, the overall conclusion must be that the resistance is by no means quiescent.

²⁰ Interview with LPRP Central Committee member Nhieu Lobliayao carried by *Pasason*, 19 May 1983 (*JPRS* 1312).

acts" against Vietnam in the border shelling of April more forcefully than it blamed China for "psywar tactics" against Laos. China was held responsible not only for military provocation on the border with Vietnam, but also for keeping tension high on the Thai-Kampuchean border. Such crimes could never be concealed, an article in *Pasason* stated, despite Chinese attempts to blame others. "How can one conceal the body of a dead elephant by covering it with just one lotus leaf?" the paper demanded (*Pasason*, 22 April 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 25 April 1983).

In contrast to the tension along Vietnam's border with China, the Lao-Chinese border remained all but free of incidents, except on one occasion when Chinese troops were accused of firing into Laos.²¹ The major complaint the Lao had concerning Chinese actions specifically directed against Laos was over interviews with Lao exiles, or Chinese who had previously lived and worked in Laos. Such broadcasts were labelled "encroachments on Lao sovereignty", and the Chinese were requested to cease such "undesirable" acts (*Sieng Pasason*, 11 February 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 16 February 1983).

During 1983 the Chinese did seem to differentiate between their attitudes towards Laos and Vietnam. The Chinese message on Laos' national day was warmly worded, extending "wholehearted greetings" to the Lao Government and people and wishing them "further success in their cause of national construction". "China and Laos are neighbouring Third World countries which have maintained a historic cooperation", the Chinese note reminded the Lao leadership. "The Chinese government and people sincerely hope to see Chinese-Lao relations of friendship restored and developed on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence, and are pleased to make active efforts [to this end]" (quoted in *Asian Almanac* 1983, p. 11671). The Lao replied in like manner in their congratulations after the Chinese National People's Congress met in June. Laos hoped that "the time honoured traditional relations of friendship between the two countries . . . will be consolidated and normalized in the common interest of the peoples of Laos and China and in the interest of peace in Asia and the world" (Radio Vientiane, 29 June 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 30 June 1983).

The LPRP official organ, *Pasason*, itself commented on the change in tone of Chinese attitudes towards Laos, but warned that this was only "a device". A stereotype list of Chinese actions in their "all-round notorious and cunning war against the Lao revolution" followed, but made no mention of the so-called "Lanna division" the Chinese had previously been accused of training ready to attack Laos. Most of the article again concentrated on Chinese attitudes towards Kampuchea, and attempts to undermine Indochinese solidarity through collusion with the United States and Thailand (*Pasason*, 24 August 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 26 August 1983). The overall impression, therefore, was that whereas the Lao have few complaints about Chinese policies towards their own country, they are still very concerned, given their close relations with Vietnam and Kampuchea, over Chinese policies towards these two states.

The Indochina Solidarity Bloc

Laos accepts the Vietnamese position that the only way to counter Chinese ambitions in Southeast Asia is through the close co-operation of the three states of Indochina. Consolidation of the relationship between them was given symbolic expression in the first summit conference of the leaders of the communist parties and governments of Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea which met in Vientiane on 22 and 23 February 1983. Representing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) were Le Duan, Secretary-General of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Central Committee, and Pham Van Dong, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the SRV. Representing the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) were Heng Samrin, Secretary-General of the Central

²¹ This happened on 28 January 1983. See *Sieng Pasason*, 15 February 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 16 February 1983).

Committee of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party, and Chan Si, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the PRK. As both Secretary-General of the LPRP and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the LPDR, Kaysone Phomvihane alone represented Laos and signed the final communiqué, though Souphanouvong was also mentioned as jointly leading the Lao delegation.

In his opening address to the conference, Kaysone sounded a number of themes which were to be echoed frequently thereafter. The first was recognition of the role of Ho Chi Minh and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in laying the foundations for the "Indochinese revolution"; second was the role of Vietnam as the "staunch and unbreakable mainstay for the firm militant solidarity among Laos, Vietnam and Kampuchea"; and third was the importance of Indochinese solidarity in defeating "the dark designs of the Chinese reactionaries". In the face of Chinese ambitions "to swallow up the three countries [of Indochina] and pave the way for expanding their territory to the whole of Southeast Asia", Kaysone told his guests, the "great friendship, special solidarity and military alliance" of Laos, Vietnam, and Kampuchea was "a matter of life and death, and a law of development for the revolutions in the three countries" (Radio Vientiane, 24 February 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 24 February 1983).

The final communiqué issued by the conference reiterated these points. The statement stressed that "whenever solidarity is jeopardized, each country's independence is in danger", and went on to make quite clear that, although there existed collusion between Washington and Beijing, China was the principal enemy. The "Chinese expansionists and hegemonists" were accused of hatching schemes of aggression and annexation against the three states of Indochina, and of carrying out multifaced sabotaging activities" against all three. All three countries therefore pledged to strengthen still more their solidarity and co-operation "on the bases of Marxism-Leninism and socialist internationalism", and to guard against "big-power chauvinism and narrow-minded nationalism".²²

But apart from its symbolic significance, the summit achieved little. A statement was made on the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea, but nothing was said about the estimated 50,000 Vietnamese troops in Laos. Further summit meetings were planned, but no date was given and no regular period set before the next. Foreign ministers would continue to meet twice yearly, as they had already been doing; and each country would set up a Committee for Economic and Cultural Cooperation between the three states. This last represented the only positive result of the summit, though this too was more image than substance. When the chairmen of the three national committees met in Phnom Penh in July, they did nothing more than reiterate once again their mutual solidarity and send a signal to the ASEAN states that the three nations of Indochina were more concerned with economic development than with provoking conflict (Radio Vientiane, 8 July 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 8 July 1983).

The summit statement also pledged the three Indochinese states to "constantly strengthen unity and comprehensive cooperation with the Soviet Union", while expressing a desire for "normal relations" with the United States. An olive branch was also extended to Beijing. The three states acknowledged "an age-old tradition of friendship with the Chinese people" which they would "always cherish". The three insisted they were not to blame for "the present abnormal situation", and would "spare no efforts to restore normal relations with the People's Republic of China on the basis of coexistence in peace".

The summit was an excuse for elaborate protestations of everlasting friendship and ever closer co-operation. The solidarity between the three states was likened to the Annamite Ranges and the Mekong River, a "precious tradition and valuable heritage"

²²Text as given in News Bulletin, Embassy of Lao People's Democratic Republic, Canberra (no date).

which would last into the future (*Sieng Pasason*, 24 February 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 25 February 1983). But as if to dispel fears that the relationship was becoming too close for Lao comfort, Lao Foreign Minister Phoun Sipaseut reminded an interviewer that the three countries remained "completely independent and sovereign states" (Radio Vientiane, 23 February 1983; *FBIS: AP*, 28 February 1983).

Judging by the continuous stream of delegations exchanged between Laos and Vietnam, and the succession of agreements on every conceivable matter, political, social and economic, the relationship between the two states was materially strengthened in 1983. In particular, military co-operation was reinforced by the visit of Vietnamese Defence Minister Van Tien Dung in January. During his four-day visit, Dung inspected Lao and Vietnamese forces in Laos and held talks with Lao Defence Minister Khamtai Siphandone and the high command of the Lao People's Army. In his speeches on Lao-Vietnamese solidarity, Dung waxed almost lyrical. The friendship between the two countries was, he said, "like that of brothers sharing the same mother, the same ideal and the same mind and soul".

May the Vietnam-Laos special relationship be bright and forever beautiful, smell as sweet as the fragrant champac flower and the blooming lotus, last forever like the Truong Son mountains, and be as unceasing as the waters of the Red or Mekong Rivers.²³

Vietnam, Dung said, would defend this relationship "just as we protect our own eyeballs".

Military co-operation between the three Indochinese states was further emphasized by the visit to Vientiane later in the same month of Kampuchean Defence Minister Bou Thang to coincide with the 34th anniversary of the Lao People's Army. Bou Thang visited army installations in the southern Lao provinces of Champassak and Attapeu, probably with a view to co-ordinating Lao-Kampuchean joint military action against insurgents (both Lao and Kampuchean) operating in the border region. Lao Defence Minister Khamtai Siphandone pledged continued Lao support to strengthen the militant alliance between the two armies and countries, and Bou Thang replied in like vein. Overall, however, the speeches were less effusive than those during Van Tien Dung's visit.

Bou Thang's visit was followed up by other delegations from the logistics and political departments of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Armed Forces, a series of meetings between Lao and Kampuchean military leaders which further reinforced military co-operation between the two countries. But while political contacts were also frequent during 1983, and a series of delegations exchanged visits, economic co-operation appeared to be minimal and it was noticeable that Lao-Kampuchean relations were not given the same priority or reinforced in the same way as those between Laos and Vietnam. The Indochina Solidarity Bloc clearly depended more on bilateral relations with a dominant Vietnam than on tripartite relations between three equal states.

The Soviet Union

As with the Indochina Solidarity Bloc, relations with the Soviet Union were also consolidated during 1983. Soviet delegations arrived and left in a constant stream, all providing occasions for effusive protestations of friendship and co-operation between Laos and the USSR. Every major occasion or anniversary celebrated in the Soviet Union had its counterpart in Laos. The most important of these occasions was that celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of the USSR. Kaysone dutifully made the trip to

²³ Radio Vientiane, 5 January 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 7 January 1983).

Moscow, while the remaining members of the Politburo under the chairmanship of Souphanouvong and in the affable presence of Soviet Ambassador Vladimir Sobchenko lined up at a mass rally in Vientiane. Souphanouvong called the Soviet Union "a steel prop for world peace and revolution", and expressed his country's "profound friendship and gratitude toward the heroic Soviet party, state and people". Speaking next, Phoumi Vongvichit referred to the "countless" things the Soviet Union had done for Laos, stressed that Lao solidarity and co-operation with the Soviet Union was "of paramount importance", and vowed that Laos would allow no one to wreck the relationship (Radio Vientiane, 28 December 1982; *FBIS:AP*, 3 January 1983).

The warmth of such sentiments suggests that Soviet influence may be on the increase in Laos. Estimates of the number of Soviet diplomats and advisers both civilian and military at present in Laos range as high as 3,000.²⁴ Soviet economic assistance is financing a major part of the Lao five-year plan, and Soviet military aid provides all the more sophisticated weapons in use by the Lao armed forces. Small wonder that when the Soviet Ambassador gave a lecture on Soviet policies, a considerable number of ranking Lao officials attended, including Central Committee members and Foreign Minister Phoun Sipaseut.

Yet official Lao policy, as enunciated by LPRP Secretary-General Kaysone Phomvihane, draws a careful distinction between Lao relations with Vietnam, within the Indochina Solidarity Bloc, and relations with the Soviet Union. Whereas there exists a "special relationship of militant solidarity" with Vietnam, the relationship with the Soviet Union is characterized as one of "solidarity and all-round co-operation".²⁵

Lao relations with the rest of the Soviet bloc do not have the same warmth as those with the Soviet Union. Cuba has medical teams working in Laos, and Souphanouvong paid an official visit to the Caribbean state. Diplomatic relations were established between Laos and Afghanistan for the first time in March 1983 at the time of the Seventh Non-Aligned Summit in New Delhi. Mongolia is building a fifty-bed hospital in Xieng Khouang province, and Bulgaria, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia all have construction projects underway in Laos. The other European socialist states, Poland and Rumania, seldom received mention in the Lao media.

The United States

Relations with the other superpower were somewhat less cordial. Laos continued to denounce collusion between U.S. imperialists, Chinese expansionists and hegemonists, and Thai reactionaries in destabilizing the region. More specifically the United States was condemned for increasing arms sales to Thailand, and for continuing to support the anti-Vietnamese Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea. U.S. policy in Central America was also strongly denounced during visits to Vientiane of Grenada's former Foreign Minister, Unison Whiteman, and Nicaragua's Sandanista leader, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, both in March.

But it was the activities of a former Special Forces colonel named James "Bo" Gritz which led to the sharpest Lao criticism of the United States. According to Thai reports, Gritz first entered Laos illegally in November 1982 with three other Americans and a small contingent of Lao anti-government guerrillas, ostensibly to locate American servicemen whom he believed were still alive and imprisoned in Laos. The operation was code-named Lazarus. In February 1983, Gritz again crossed into Laos from Thailand, but was arrested by Thai authorities when he returned. He was given a one-year suspended sentence for illegal possession of a radio transmitter and asked to leave the

²⁴ Nayan Chanda, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 25 August 1983, p. 36.

²⁵ See, for example, Kaysone's speech welcoming Van Tien Dung as reported by the Vietnam News Agency, 3 January 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 4 January 1983).

country. In May, Gritz was back and entered Laos a third time. Not until June was he finally expelled from Thailand as *persona non grata* — when his visa extension expired (*Bangkok Post*, 1 and 9 June 1983).

Laos held Washington directly responsible for Operation Lazarus which, according to Radio Vientiane, had “adversely affected relations between the two countries, including the issue regarded as most important by the United States itself: the search for the U.S. MIA’s in Laos”. Lao authorities once again denied there were any missing Americans still in Laos, and claimed to have returned all physical remains found. They called upon the United States “to adopt drastic measures to ensure that such an undesirable incident will never take place again, because it constitutes open and arrogant interference in the internal affairs of Laos and is a serious encroachment on the sovereignty of an independent state” (Radio Vientiane, 8 April 1983; *FBIS:AP*, 8 April 1983). Considering what might have been said, this constituted a somewhat muted response, and confirmed the impression that both countries would prefer to improve relations between them.

Thailand

Relations between Laos and Thailand, though still marked by shooting incidents along the Mekong and by mutual criticism, remained relatively tranquil during 1983. But while the Thais contented themselves with accusing the Lao leadership of being the “mouthpiece of Vietnam”, the Lao were more pointed in their condemnation of all “vicious people in the Thai ruling circles” who served foreign schemes by aiding Lao insurgents and colluding with U.S. imperialists and Chinese reactionaries. Despite such criticism, a leading Thai official even described Thai-Lao relations as “most cordial”, and the Lao did emphasize that there were really only very few vicious people in Thai ruling circles. In fact there was often an almost ritual quality to denunciations by both sides of the actions of the other, and both seemed eager to prevent any breakdown in relations over shooting incidents which might lead to closure of the border.

As in previous years, most of the shooting along the Mekong frontier during 1983 occurred either as a result of Lao insurgents crossing from Thailand, or through disagreement over the position of the frontier. Thailand continued to call for revision of the line drawn by the French which gave all islands in the Mekong to Laos, and supported its demands by regular patrolling down the main channel of the river. One incident occurred when the Thais attempted to lay marker buoys within 200 metres of the Lao bank.

In a note delivered to the Thai Ambassador in Vientiane at the end of May, the Lao Foreign Ministry listed eight major incidents during the first five months of 1983, but said “many more” minor ones had not been included. The note also gave a list of seven Thai bases from which Lao rebels operated, and demanded that Thai authorities disarm the insurgents and close down the bases.²⁶ But at the same time as they condemned Thai provocation, the Lao called for improved relations and were quick to enter into provincial level discussions to resolve problems as they arose.²⁷

When former Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chamanand led a nineteen-member delegation from the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Thai House of Representatives on a five-day official visit to Laos in August, he was given red-carpet treatment. The delegation met not only with Lao Foreign Minister Phoun Sipaseut, but also with Souphanouvong and with Kaysone himself. It was an ideal occasion for the Lao to recall

²⁶ Radio Vientiane, 31 May 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 3 June 1983). See also *Vientiane Mai*, 4 June 1983 (*JPRS* 1317) for Lao condemnation of Thai support for terrorism in Laos.

²⁷ For example, after an incident in January in which one Lao civilian was killed and three more wounded. Radio Vientiane, 18 January 1983 (*FBIS:AP*, 18 January 1983) and *Bangkok World*, 18 January 1983.

that when Kriangsak was prime minister in 1979, he and Kaysone had exchanged official visits and placed Thai-Lao relations on the friendliest footing since the Lao regime took power in 1975. It was all the more surprising, therefore, that at the same time Radio Vientiane should stress the need for border security, and label Thailand "a hypocritical country" which on the one hand claimed it wanted "to be a good friend of Laos", and on the other was feeding and training Lao traitors trying to sabotage and overthrow the Lao regime.

Two further problems which continued to bedevil Thai-Lao relations were the question of refugees, and the International Mekong Committee. Several hundred Lao refugees returned from Thailand during 1983 under the auspices of the U.N. High Commission for Refugees. But some Laos refused to accept.²⁸ As for the Mekong Commission, the refusal of Thailand to accept representation by the People's Republic of Kampuchea remained an obstacle to co-operation, and in 1983 two separate meetings were again held — an international meeting from which Kampuchea was excluded, and an Indochinese National Mekong Commission Conference to maintain a façade of Kampuchean participation.

Lao attitudes towards Thailand therefore oscillated between a desire for friendship and annoyance at Thai intransigence, particularly over support for Lao insurgents and for the Kampuchean anti-Vietnamese coalition. The Lao made it clear they wanted a peaceful frontier on the Mekong, with more than the three official crossing points permitted. But the issue of Kampuchea continued to dictate Thai responses to Lao overtures.

Conclusion

On the whole, 1983 was as good a year as could be expected for Laos. It laid the basis for further internal political consolidation — always providing that economic conditions continue slowly to improve, the insurgency problem remains of manageable proportions, and further strengthening of relations with Vietnam and the Soviet Union does not lead to a corresponding deterioration of relations with China or Thailand. This may not be regarded as a very positive achievement, but in view of the immense problems still facing the present Lao regime, it does constitute a minimal necessary requirement for political stability and future economic development.

The year 1983 was the third in the country's first five-year plan, and confirmed the wisdom of the economic liberalization which dates from the beginning of 1980. The problems which now begin to confront the regime, at least in the capital, Vientiane, are those associated with increasing prosperity rather than with impoverishment and economic decline. How these problems are handled, given the regime's ideological objectives, will determine to a large extent the country's future welfare and prospects for economic development.

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²⁸ *Bangkok Post*, 1 August 1983. See also *Nation Review*, 10 August 1983. According to *Vientiane Mai*, 5 February 1983 (JPRS 1274), 844 refugees comprising 277 families returned to Laos during 1982. But many more are believed to have returned surreptitiously.