

10 men accused of plotting coup in Laos

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Hmong exiles in state, retired U.S. colonel allegedly raised money to buy, export arms

[Demian Bulwa, Meredith May, Tom Chorneau, Chronicle Staff Writers](#)

(06-05) 04:00 PDT Sacramento — Echoes of the war in Southeast Asia rolled through a federal courtroom here Monday as a group of Laotian men and a retired U.S. Army officer who served during the Vietnam War were accused of raising thousands of dollars to mount a coup to overthrow the communist government of Laos.

A prominent Laotian exile leader enlisted by the CIA to fight the communists during the war was among the 10 men accused of violating the federal Neutrality Act by lining up mercenary forces and trying to buy high-powered military equipment for an insurrection against the Laotian government.

The equipment, some of which had already been purchased, included shoulder-fired Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, machine guns and land mines, according to a criminal complaint filed in federal court.

The arsenal was to be used against both military and civilian officials of Laos, including an attack on the nation's capital intended to reduce government targets to rubble, federal authorities said.

The men were arrested in raids across the state Monday after the operation was infiltrated by an undercover agent from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, according to a criminal complaint filled with references to safe houses, wiretaps and CIA secrets.

"The enormity of the crimes is beyond anything I've encountered," Assistant U.S. Attorney Bob Twiss told U.S. Magistrate Judge Kimberly Mueller during a court hearing. "The defendants conspired to murder thousands of people."

The case is an explosive one for the estimated 65,000 ethnic Hmong in California, because of the arrest of 77-year-old Vang Pao of Westminster (Orange County), perhaps the most prominent Hmong exile in the country.

Pao was a general under the former Laotian government who came to the United States in 1975. He led Hmong tribesmen during the Vietnam War, when members of the ethnic group were recruited and trained by the CIA to fight communist forces.

The criminal complaint identifies him as the head of the Neo Hom, a movement opposing

the Laotian government.

Also arrested was Harrison Ulrich Jack, 60, of Woodland (Yolo County), described by the government as a former Army officer who was stationed for a time in Southeast Asia before leaving active duty in 1977.

He later served in the California National Guard and retired as a lieutenant colonel, the complaint says.

The complaint says Jack was hired by the other men, who are of Hmong ancestry, because of his “contacts in the American defense, homeland security and defense contractor community.”

Jack has been an adjunct professor with Golden Gate University for 15 years. Yolo County officials say they hired him in March as an ombudsman to help county employees with workplace issues.

Eight of the 10 men who were arrested appeared in court Monday.

Pao, wearing heavy dark glasses, sat quietly until acknowledging acceptance of his court-appointed attorney.

At one point, Jack turned and winked at his wife in the audience.

All the men are being held without bail and are due back in court today. None has been charged. Federal prosecutors have 10 days to file charges or obtain a grand jury indictment.

Attorneys for Jack and Pao declined to comment Monday.

Mark Reichel, a Sacramento attorney appointed to represent Lo Cha Thao, a 34-year-old Clovis resident who did not appear in court, said he had not yet spoken to his client but had some initial concerns about the case.

“Most people in their lifetime never have to suffer the way these people suffered in their homeland,” Reichel said. “It may be the case that they have thoughts of returning, and it may also be the case that law enforcement pushed them further than they would have gone just with their own feelings.”

Other defendants include Lo Thao, 53, of Stockton, president of the nonprofit United Hmong International; Youa True Vang, 60, of Sanger (Fresno County), founder of a group called Hmong International New Year; and Hue Vang, 39, a police officer in Clovis from 1989 to 1999 who directs the Fresno-based United Lao Council for Peace, Freedom and Reconstruction.

Also arrested were Chong Yang Thao, 53, of Fresno; Seng Vue, 68, of Fresno; Chue Lo, 59, of Stockton; and Nhia Kao Vang, 48, of Rancho Cordova.

The criminal complaint included an account from the unidentified federal undercover agent, who wrote that seven of the men had formed a committee to look at the possibility of overthrowing the Laotian government while operating within the “general scope” of Pao’s Neo Hom movement.

The agent said he had been tipped off by a defense contractor who had spoken to Jack about weapons.

The men allegedly raised money to buy AK-47s and other automatic weapons, Stinger missiles, anti-tank rockets, Claymore mines, C-4 explosives, ammunition, night-vision goggles and other equipment.

As of last month, the group had agents in the Laotian capital of Vientiane and had drawn up plans for a military strike there, the complaint says.

"The defendants have issued instructions that the mercenary force is to destroy ... government facilities, to reduce them to rubble, and make them look like the results of the attack upon the World Trade Center in New York on Sept. 11, 2001," the complaint says.

The undercover agent said he first spoke with Jack in late January. On Feb. 7, he said, he had a face-to-face meeting with Jack, Pao and 10 others at a Sacramento restaurant, where the subject was the purchase of weapons.

The agent said he was shown "several maps of Laos, showing locations purported to be Lao government military positions and insurgent forces positions." The agent also said he allowed the men to inspect samples of weapons, including AK-47s, rockets and mines.

During one conversation, the agent wrote, Jack quoted Lo Cha Thao as saying that "the CIA was preparing to assist the Hmong insurgency once the takeover of Laos had begun."

On Feb. 15, the complaint says, Jack told the agent he had met with nearly two dozen of his clients and had budgeted for the purchase of weapons.

"The cost of the entire list which had been provided was approximately \$9.8 million," the complaint says.

The men had paid \$100,000 for an initial installment of 125 machine guns, 20,000 rounds of ammunition and smoke grenades that were to be delivered June 12 to a safe house in Bangkok, the complaint says. A second installment of weapons, including Stinger missiles, was to be delivered to a remote location in Thailand on June 19, the complaint says.

McGregor Scott, the U.S. attorney for the eastern district of California, noted that while the United States and Laotian communists were once enemies, the two governments now have normal relations.

"This is the legitimate government of Laos," he said. "It is a country with which we are at peace, and our laws say that you cannot do what these men attempted to do."

Jack's neighbors were stunned upon hearing the news about his arrest.

"I would say it's shocking to say the least, especially in a small town like Woodland. ... This just seems too Tom Clancy-ish to me," said Ryan Hermle, 30.

Chronicle staff writer Matthew Yi contributed to this report. E-mail Demian Bulwa at dbulwa@sfchronicle.com.

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