
Laos: US war on drugs is leading to increased poverty

When Secretary of State Colin Powell presented the US State Department's 2003 human rights country reports earlier this year, he obviously hoped that the scandal of US forces' systematic torture of Iraqi prisoners would never see the light of day. "President Bush regards the defense and advancement of human rights as America's special calling," Powell said.

Putting aside the Bush regime's staggering hypocrisy, the US 2003 report on human rights in Laos makes disturbing reading. The Lao government's "human rights record remained poor, and it continued to commit serious abuses", the report states.

For more than a decade, the Lao government has been carrying out a programme to remove Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral homes in the mountains to lowland areas of the country. In its report, the US State Department notes that during 2003, the Lao government "accelerated efforts" to relocate upland farmers to lowland areas, "in keeping with the Government's plan to end opium production by 2005 and slash-and-burn agriculture by 2010."

The Lao government's resettlement programme amounts to a complete restructuring of rural society in Laos. Hundreds of villages, many of them of Indigenous Peoples, have been moved from the mountains down to lowland areas. In theory, the government provides services such as roads, schools and health care at a series of "focal zones" in lowland areas and "encourages" people to move. In reality, "District and provincial officials used persuasion and, in some cases, verbal orders to encourage villages to relocate, especially in the northern provinces," according to the US human rights report.

A foreign development worker in Laos, speaking on condition of anonymity, describes the reality of life in the focal zones: "In too many cases the economic alternatives for those relocated are nothing more than modern indentured servitude. Young girls end up in brothels and the men end up exploited as illegal immigrant labourers in neighbouring Thailand."

The US report confirms that "The result was that in some districts relocated villagers experienced increased poverty, hunger, malnourishment, susceptibility to disease, and increased mortality."

Yet, in the north of Laos, much of the relocation is carried out with support from the US government, in the name of its "war on drugs". Since 1989, the US government has handed over US\$38 million for drug control to the Lao government.

Many villagers in northern Laos, including Indigenous Peoples, produce opium as a cash crop. Selling opium is often their only source of income to buy food and medicine.

Although Laos is the third largest opium producer in the world, its production is far below that of Afghanistan and Burma and it exports little. Even if opium production in Laos was completely stopped it would have no impact on the availability of heroin in the US or Europe. Yet the US Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs commented in a March 2004 report that the

“trafficked heroin is the reason for international concern about the opium/heroin situation in Laos.”

The war on drugs in Laos started in 1989 with a “Lao–American integrated development project” in Houa Phan province in north-eastern Laos. The project aimed to decrease opium cultivation and involved road building and irrigation, supposedly to provide alternative livelihoods for opium growers. The project was mired in allegations of corruption, badly implemented infrastructure projects and enormous waste. A road built under the project had to be rebuilt last year at a cost, to US taxpayers, of US\$500,000. Some of the people resettled have returned to the uplands.

Despite the problems, the US has expanded its anti-drug “aid” to projects in Phonsaly and Luang Prabang provinces. Other governments, including Germany, have joined in with integrated development or detoxification projects in opium growing areas.

In an attempt to meet the 2005 deadline of eradicating opium production, provincial and district level officials have started implementing draconian measures to eliminate opium growing. Officials have sent the army, youth brigades, student groups and the Women’s Union to opium growing areas to cut down poppies.

As a result, many upland communities have seen their only cash crop destroyed, with no help to find alternatives to opium production.

Opium can have devastating effects on communities, families and individuals, especially when opium use becomes widespread in a village. But when opium addicts lose their home-grown supply, they are forced to buy it from neighbouring villages. They are often tempted to buy cheaper and more dangerous alternatives such as methamphetamine derivatives. “This has had consequences far worse for local communities than opium has ever had and is leading to severe impoverishment and cultural disruption,” says the anonymous development worker.

The US-Lao anti-drug programme is so far not even helping to reduce the amount of opium in Laos. In 2003, according to the US government, potential opium production was 200 tons, an increase of 11 per cent over the previous year. The US Bureau for International Narcotics explains in its March 2004 report that eradication of poppies in accessible areas is leading to traffickers contracting farmers to grow poppies in more remote areas.

The Lao government hopes to get more funding for its anti-drug activities. It has made a formal request for a US\$10 million loan from the World Bank for a project which would be carried out by the UN Office of Drugs and Crime.

Through the mechanism of opium eradication and “development”, the Lao government, with the willing backing of the US and other Northern governments, is handing over Indigenous Peoples’ land to be logged, converted to industrial tree plantations, flooded by hydropower dams, dug up for mineral extraction or “protected” in the name of nature conservation.

By supporting the Lao government’s resettlement programme, the foreign development worker concludes, the US government’s war on drugs is “impoverishing thousands, promoting cultural disruption, and strengthening the hands of the repressive elements in the Lao government who were already unsympathetic to the needs, rights, and livelihood systems of ethnic minority people in the country.”

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