



Hmong general Vang Pao, who was arrested last week for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government of Laos, speaking in 2000 after laying a wreath at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. (AFP Photo)

Guerrillas in our midst

The Justice Department goes after 'freedom fighters,' and rankles conservatives

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By Joshua Kurlantzick | June 10, 2007

Earlier this week, the Justice Department announced a major bust. After a six-month undercover sting investigation, it charged nine people with violating the Neutrality Act, which bars Americans from plotting to topple foreign governments recognized by the US. The men, members of the Southeast Asian Hmong minority, allegedly envisioned a massive military operation, laying plans to ship surface-to-air missiles, rockets, mines, and guns to Laos to equip rebels there.

The alleged mastermind? Vang Pao, a 77-year-old refugee from Laos who for decades has been flamboyantly raising money to fund Hmong rebels -- and winning the admiration of American conservatives.

But in the post 9/11 era, Washington finds it can no longer tolerate guerrillas in America's midst. Vang Pao is part of a wave of arrests of fighters who have targeted nations like Laos, Cambodia, and Cuba with which Washington has historically maintained limited or no relations. The crackdown has put the Bush administration in a bind. If it doesn't act, it can be accused of a double standard in the war on terror -- a war that requires help from some of these very nations, like Cambodia. But when it does act, it draws the ire of some of its conservative supporters, who for years have embraced controversial fighters like Vang Pao, feting him in Washington at think tanks and congressional receptions.

In 1987 Vang Pao spoke at The Heritage Foundation, where he outlined his plans for revolution, telling the audience he would "overthrow the puppet regime" in Laos. He then won the support of conservative lawmakers like California's Dana Rohrabacher, who appeared at a reception several years ago for Vang Pao, where he reportedly shouted "Free Laos! Free Laos!" Vang Pao hired a Washington lobbying firm and earlier this decade his associates held "Congressional Forums on Laos" on Capitol Hill during which the lobbyists addressed lawmakers and aides.

After Vang Pao's arrest, conservative newspaper defended him, arguing, "We could barely believe our eyes. . . . He is a freedom fighter who will tower over any courtroom into which he is brought."

Vang Pao has been fighting a long time. In the 1960s, as the Vietnam War spread into Laos, where America conducted secret operations against the Vietnamese and Laotian communists, the United States recruited Vang Pao, the tough leader of a group of ethnic Hmong. Vang Pao and his men became experts in jungle warfare and, along with secret US advisors, fought in bloody encounters with the North Vietnamese and Laotian forces. As the war wound down, the US essentially abandoned the Hmong and Laotian forces brutalized them, leaving many of Vang Pao's men with a vicious taste for revenge.

Vang Pao eventually made it to America, where he essentially continued his warlord lifestyle. Former employees told me Vang Pao demanded absolute loyalty, telling them to leave their families to stay by his side. He surrounded himself with women (he has been married numerous times) and former army officers from Laos, and at community gatherings older Hmong reverently touched Vang Pao like he was a god.

With his support in the community, by the early 1980s Vang Pao had created an organization that solicited funds from Hmong refugees each month, the millions in donations supposedly earmarked to help insurgents still living in the jungles of Laos. In Laos' dense forests, small bands of fighters continued to wage war, and though it remained unclear whether they had ties to Vang Pao, early in this decade the militants attacked buses along the country's north-south highway, killing at least 12 people.

Vang Pao is ailing. When I met him on an assignment last year, in a Minnesota office near St. Paul's capitol building, he sometimes forgot where he was. But once he got rolling, the steel returned to his voice.

"We still can fight the Lao government," he told me. "With enough weapons, we can go back to war, wipe them out."

Nearly every Hmong-American I met had heard about Vang Pao's continued war. Many revered him, hanging photos of him in their houses, but some complained about his organization, which they felt hurt the image of the Hmong and siphoned money from refugees with little cash to give.

"He was taking money from even old women who were living with nothing," says Tou Long Lo, Vang Pao's former son-in-law, who used to work for the money-collecting operation.

In the global war on terror, Washington is finding more and more of these inconvenient freedom fighters. Shortly after 9/11, the US arrested Vo Duc Van, a member of the Government of Free Vietnam, a California-based group that fights the Vietnamese government, with which the US now has closer relations. Vo allegedly was involved in a plot to bomb the Vietnamese embassy in Bangkok, and the US has extradited him to stand trial in Thailand.

Then, in May 2005, federal agents arrested Luis Posada Carriles, a 79-year-old anti-Castro militant wanted in Venezuela on charges of bombing a Cuban airliner in 1976, an attack that killed 73 people. Carriles also admitted to other attacks, including the 1997 bombings of hotels in Cuba. Fidel Castro's government had used Carriles's case to make Washington look like it did not consistently prosecute

terrorists, a point that resonated with many Latin American and European nations. (A judge dismissed his case, but the Justice Department is considering what steps to take next.)

Carriles's arrest was not popular with conservative Cuban exiles, important supporters of the White House. Carriles "has been fighting one of the worst tyrannies this continent has experienced," Pepe Hernandez, president of the hard-line Cuban American National Foundation, told reporters.

Only weeks after nabbing Carriles, the government arrested Chhun Yasith, a Long Beach, California, resident who had allegedly plotted an attempted coup in Cambodia in 2000. After the plan failed, the State Department had placed Chhun Yasith's organization on its terrorism watch list, but he had lived freely in California for years, and even raised money for the Republican Party. Today, however, the US relies on counterterrorism cooperation with Cambodia, which has arrested several members of Jemaah Islamiyah, an Al Qaeda-linked group.

When I interviewed Chhun Yasith before his arrest, he boasted to me that he had planned more attacks, and put me on speakerphone with fighters he claimed were hiding out on the Thai-Cambodian border. Chhun Yasith bluntly told me he had nothing to fear.

"The FBI comes here, they ask me questions, they don't do anything," he said with a big smile. Shortly after, they did.

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