

secrecy. Around 700 PL party members stayed behind in the two provinces.<sup>69</sup>

To cover itself, Hanoi accelerated its efforts to begin training PL cadres and military officers in Vietnamese schools, military academies and political institutes. There, the Vietnamese continued to train Lao cadres for running military, political and cultural affairs. In 1957, 500 Laotian youths were selected for training in Vietnamese institutions, though only 330 actually left. Samanvinaket, the Deputy Political Commissar in the PL, took a group of these students to study at 'Cultural School 399' (Truong Van Hoa 399) in northern Vietnam. Doan 100 sent advisers with this educational delegation.<sup>70</sup> On 30 October 1956, the Pathet Lao and the Lao Kingdom government signed a ceasefire treaty. On 15 November 1957, the Western Party Affairs Committee agreed with the LPRP Central Committee that the time had come to pull out political and military advisers and specialists from basic units.<sup>71</sup> Following a decision made in December, the VWP pulled Doan 100 out of Laos in January 1958. The integration of PL forces into the RLG army had begun in December 1957. It appears that the Western Party Affairs Committee under Nguyen Khang remained behind in Laos.<sup>72</sup>

### **Armed struggle and Doan 959 (1959–62)**

In pulling out Doan 100 in early 1958, Hanoi was betting that the RLG would pursue a policy of neutrality like that of Sihanouk: so much so that the Vietnamese gambled on the integration of the Pathet Lao's two major battalions into the RLG army and Hanoi supported a policy of political, but not armed struggle for the Pathet Lao within the Laotian political process. What no-one saw coming were the meltdown of Laotian politics and the outbreak of civil war, as outlined briefly above. The confidence changed to shock when Hanoi saw anticommunists such as Phoui Sananikone and Phoumi Nosavan, backed by the Americans, move to take over Lao politics, adopt a hard-line anticommunist stand and arrest leading Pathet Lao leaders in Vientiane, including Souphanouvong and Nouhak, among others. Sihanouk was more subtle.

<sup>69</sup> 'Chi thi cua quan uy va bo chi huy toi cao Lao, lich su quan doi nhan dan Lao', cited in Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 88, note 1.

<sup>70</sup> Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 89–90.

<sup>71</sup> 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34.

<sup>72</sup> Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 90–95.

As in the Cambodian coup of 1970, the Lao crisis that came in May of 1959 directly affected major Vietnamese security concerns. First, 1959 marked the year in which the VWP adopted an armed line in southern Vietnam in opposition to the government led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Second, in May 1959, the VWP officially created the Ho Chi Minh Trail to supply arms, men and supplies to the war effort in southern Vietnam. As the next few years would demonstrate painfully, the Vietnamese encountered serious difficulties in pushing the Ho Chi Minh Trail down the eastern side of the Annamese Cordillera (Truong Son in Vietnamese) and would decide to push it westwards into southern Laos and then into upper southern Vietnam (often by way of north-eastern Cambodia). While I will not discuss the Ho Chi Minh Trail's impact on DRV Lao policy here, suffice it to say that, as in 1970 in Cambodia, the Vietnamese army sent troops into southern Laos to ensure access to eastern lower Laos, vital to the operation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This was particularly the case in May 1961, when the DRV sent battalions of the 325<sup>th</sup> division into southern Laos before the signing of the ceasefire for the Geneva Accords of 1961.<sup>73</sup>

The Lao crisis of May 1959 was a turning point in DRV policy towards Laos and in the future of the Pathet Lao. Ta Quang Buu, who had signed the Geneva Accords, said publicly at this time that the Accords regarding Laos had to be applied and that the DRV would 'not be indifferent if a military intervention occurs in Laos due to the intervention conspiracy of the American imperialists'.<sup>74</sup> The Vietnamese clearly feared the emergence of a very hostile bloc on their western border, ie direct or even indirect US intervention in Laos, royal Lao collaboration with Ngo Dinh Diem against the expansion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the making of a wider Lao–Thai military alliance (sealed increasingly by trans-Mekong kinship ties). In early May 1959, the VWP Politburo and Central Committee met to discuss the Lao crisis and its strategic implications. The VWP Politburo reported to the Central Committee on the new situation and the 'immediate tasks of the Lao revolution'. The Politburo spoke at length of its internationalist responsibilities towards the Lao revolution. Most importantly, in my opinion, supporting the Pathet Lao was vital in aiding the liberation struggle in southern Vietnam.<sup>75</sup> Geo-strategically, 1959 was

<sup>73</sup> Pham Gia Duc (1986), *Su Doan 325, Volume II*, NXBQDND, Hanoi, p 28.

<sup>74</sup> Cited in 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34.

<sup>75</sup> Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 115.

a crucial year for the eastern part of the South East Asian continent. One of the first results of the new Vietnamese policy was that Hanoi dispatched troops to meet and help the PL battalion escaping from Vientiane and remnants of the other battalion. These returning PL forces were transferred to western Nghe An and Quang Binh provinces, refurbished, re-kitted and rearmed with modern weapons. Of particular importance was the base in Xuan Thanh in Nghe An province. There, the Vietnamese also began working intensively with ranking Lao party members on the new line to take.<sup>76</sup>

Inside Laos, the VWP Central Committee and *Quan Uy* sent Major General Le Chuong to Laos to head the 'Cadres Group for Assisting Laos' (*Doan can bo Viet Nam giup Lao*), which was attached to the Central Committee of the LPRP. The situation was critical. Kaysone called for the holding of the 'First Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the LPRP' on 3 June 1959. Unsurprisingly, it was held on Vietnamese territory.<sup>77</sup> This joint high-level Vietnamese–Lao meeting designated the USA as the main and imminent threat. Three possible scenarios were considered during the meeting. The first was that the Americans would intervene militarily in Laos; second, that the situation would stay the same without American intervention; and third, in the case that the neutralists returned to power, the Pathet Lao would adopt a policy of 'both fighting and negotiating' (*vua danh vua dam*). During this crucial meeting, Vietnamese and Lao communist leaders decided to change the line of the LPRP from one of political ('legal') struggle to one of mainly armed action (*dau tranh vu trang la chu yeu*).<sup>78</sup>

The Vietnamese were not taking any chances. On 6 July 1959, Hanoi created a special 'Working Committee on Laos' (*Ban Cong Tac Lao*), also known as CP31, in charge of Lao policy.<sup>79</sup> As during its first appearance during the French war, Vo Nguyen Giap was in charge of this Committee. At his side this time were Nguyen Khang of the Western Party Affairs Committee for Laos, and some of the VWP's most illustrious and experienced Lao experts, such as Nguyen Chinh Giao, Le Chuong, Nguyen Duc Duong and Nguyen Van Vinh. They studied the situation in Laos carefully in order to help the VWP

<sup>76</sup> Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 116.

<sup>77</sup> Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 116.

<sup>78</sup> Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 117.

<sup>79</sup> 'Tong hop nhung chi vien cua Viet Nam cho cach mang Lao (1945–1975), Ban khoa hoc, tong cuc hau can QDNDVN', *supra* note 9, at p 168.

prepare and implement its policies for Laos at all the relevant levels.<sup>80</sup> One of the most important things to come out of these preparations was the creation of Group or *Doan 959*, so named because of the date of its birth in September 1959. Its overall goal was to save the situation and to provide direct aid and advice to the Pathet Lao. The size of 959 at the outset encompassed 88 political and military individuals, including three high-ranking cadres, 38 mid-ranking ones, 47 lower-level ones and a variety of other personnel.<sup>81</sup> While the LPRP Central Committee had apparently solicited such an advisory group (which seems likely, given the disarray they were in), Hanoi needed little prompting. Again, the geo-strategic stakes were simply enormous.

Significantly, the VWP kept the Western Party Affairs Committee operational, although its name seems to have changed. On 15 July 1959, the VWP decided that the Western Regional Working Committee would include Le Chuong as its secretary. Two more top-ranking and very experienced Vietnamese experts on Laos joined him. Dinh Van Khanh served as his deputy secretary and Mai Van Quang sat on its board as a member. Both of them spoke flawless Lao, had cut their revolutionary teeth in ICP networks in north-eastern Thailand since the 1930s at least, and had worked in Laos and with Lao communists during the war against the French. Chu Huy Man was back, too. He joined this powerful committee to coordinate its work.<sup>82</sup> The Western Regional Working Committee was now a special subgroup of Doan 959, directly under the instructions of the VWP's Working Committee for Laos. This special unit was charged with dealing with all matters related to the LPRP. Its main tasks were:

- (1) to study the situation in order to 'help our friends' Central Committee [to] set forth directions, concrete policies and plans for work';
- (2) to follow the situation in Laos from all angles and report back to VWP's Central Committee;
- (3) to contribute directives, general guidelines and policies 'to help our friends' Central Committee';
- (4) to develop estimations and plans for offering advice, policies and material aid, and help them store and distribute aid on time;

<sup>80</sup> 'The tasks of the Vietnamese Party towards Laos', dated May 1959, in 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34.

<sup>81</sup> 'Tong hop nhung chi vien cua Viet Nam cho cach mang Lao (1945–1975), Ban khoa hoc, tong cuc hau can QDNDVN', *supra* note 9, at p 168.

<sup>82</sup> 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34.

- (5) to manage cadres and employees who work in the group;
- (6) to monitor the inside of the Lao Party; and finally
- (7) to give opinions and let our friends make their own decisions, 'with the utmost respect for our friends' opinions' and by 'refraining from taking over and doing their work [for them]'.<sup>83</sup>

Doan 959 worked directly in an advisory role to help rebuild the Pathet Lao's political and military structures. Once again, this meant recruiting, arming and training the PL armed forces. In late 1959, 650–700 Pathet Lao soldiers arrived in Vietnam for training and were kitted out with Soviet weapons.<sup>84</sup> Vietnamese advisers (now called 'specialists', *chuyen gia*) helped in developing the general staff, logistics and rear-guard services for the PL. They worked at all levels of the PL from the ministries and party down to the district levels. They served as advisers at the regional levels and in battalions, hospitals and schools. They also played essential roles in reactivating military academies and exercises for training PL officers and soldiers. Following the coup d'état of Phoumi Nosavan, the Vietnamese supported the PL in its alliance with Kong Le, who was opposing Phoumi Nosavan and was now defending the government of Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane (while the latter retreated to the Plain of Jars). Doan 959 had orders to help the PL and Kong Le in the fight against Phoumi Nosavan. In September 1960, the PL retook Sam Neua, allowing for the transfer there of the LPRP's Central Committee, its General Military Committee and High Command<sup>85</sup> (see Figures 4 and 5). On 7 December 1960, the VWP Central Committee sent Chu Huy Man to Vientiane to assist the Lao. He was personally involved in directing artillery fire against Phoumi Nosavan's forces.<sup>86</sup> As another Vietnamese account put it:

After 13 December 1960, when the rightists attacked Vientiane with the goal of destroying the coup forces, at the request of the legal Royal Lao government at the time, we sent a number of personnel, a total of 12 comrades (one of them a Central Committee member) to assist them directly in Vientiane. We also sent ten 105mm howitzers and one battery of 120mm mortars (only technical cadres were sent along with the guns).<sup>87</sup>

<sup>83</sup> 'Indochina is one battlefield', *supra* note 34.

<sup>84</sup> Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 123.

<sup>85</sup> Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at pp 128–129.

<sup>86</sup> Bo Quoc Phong, *supra* note 34, at p 130.

<sup>87</sup> 'Tong hop nhung chi vien cua Viet Nam cho cach mang Lao (1945–1975), Ban khoa hoc, tong cuc hau can QDNDVN', *supra* note 9, at p 168.



**Figure 4.** Kong Le speaking before the people of Sam Neua in November 1960 (copyright Bao Tang Cach Mang Viet Nam, Hanoi).

After fierce artillery fights, on 18 December Doan 959 advisers and most PL units pulled out of Vientiane and other vulnerable areas to Van Vieng. However, 959 continued to provide essential military assistance in all areas to PL battalions 1 and 2, in coordination with Vietnamese volunteer units based in Military Region IV in Nghe Tinh and Thanh Hoa provinces to the east. Together they attacked rightist forces in Nong Het, Ban Ban and the southern side of the Plain of Jars and Xieng Khouang. On 1 January 1961, Vietnamese and PL troops took the Plain of Jars, linking it to Sam Neua to create a vast base area along Vietnam's western border. This was where Souvanna Phouma's neutralist government was apparently located and receiving aid from the USSR and China via an air corridor.<sup>88</sup> As the civil war raged, the Vietnamese Central Committee and Military Committee increased the number of military advisers in Doan 959 from 160 in late 1960 to 3,085 in mid-1962. Major General Hoang Sam was sent to help in military matters, in April 1961 relieving Chu Huy Man, who returned to

<sup>88</sup> This subject is too vast to examine in this article.