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TO: PRIORITY DIA//PW-MIA (ATTN BOB SHEETZ),
SECSTATE//INR/EAP/SEA (ATTN D AVERY).~~SECRET~~SUBJECT: POW-MIA: COMMENTS OF A LAO OFFICIAL ON TENSIONS BETWEEN LAO
AND U.S. SIDES CONCERNING EFFORTS TO VERIFY CLAIMED SIGHTING OF
MISSING U.S. SERVICEMAN

1. THE FOLLOWING REPORT WAS OBTAINED IN LATE SEPTEMBER 1991 FROM

SAID IN LATE SEPTEMBER 1991 THAT TENSIONS HAVE INCREASED BETWEEN THE LAO AND U.S. SIDES FOLLOWING UNSUCCESSFUL EFFORTS IN SEPTEMBER TO VERIFY THE CLAIMED SIGHTING OF A MISSING U.S. SERVICEMAN. ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] LAO SEARCHERS FIRST WERE DISPATCHED FROM VIENTIANE TO ATTOPEU PROVINCE IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, AFTER THE LAO PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE RECEIVED A REPORT FROM A LAO RESIDENT OF THE PROVINCE WHO CLAIMED TO HAVE SEEN AN "AMERICAN SOLDIER" LIVING IN A REMOTE VILLAGE. WHEN THE LAO SEARCH TEAM LOCATED THE INFORMANT, DESCRIBED ONLY AS AN "OLD MAN," HE REFUSED TO CONSIDER ESCORTING THE TEAM ON FOOT OVER WHAT HE INDICATED WOULD BE A SIX-DAY ROUND-TRIP TREK TO AND FROM THE VILLAGE WHERE THE CLAIMED SIGHTING HAD BEEN MADE. AFTER DEMANDING AND RECEIVING PAYMENT OF TWO BAHT-WEIGHT (30.4 GRAMS) IN GOLD, PLUS A LAO GOVERNMENT PROMISE OF MORE IF THE SIGHTING PROVED TRUE, THE INFORMANT AGREED TO CARRY A CAMERA INTO THE REMOTE VILLAGE AND ATTEMPT TO PHOTOGRAPH THE PERSON WHOM HE CLAIMED TO HAVE SEEN.

2. THE INFORMANT RETURNED WITH EXPOSED FILM, BUT WHEN IT WAS DEVELOPED, THE ONLY RECOGNIZABLE PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWED JUST THE LEGS OF AN UNIDENTIFIED PERSON. THE LAO SEARCH TEAM NEVERTHELESS DECIDED TO BRING IN U.S. AUTHORITIES AFTER FURTHER INVESTIGATION OF VILLAGES IN AREAS MENTIONED BY THE INFORMANT TURNED UP THE EXISTENCE OF A PERSON WITH CAUCASIAN FEATURES LIVING IN ONE OF THEM. WHEN IT SUBSEQUENTLY WAS DETERMINED THAT THE APPARENT CAUCASIAN WAS A METIS OF FRENCH-ASIAN EXTRACTION, THE INFORMANT ATTEMPTED TO DENY THAT THIS WAS THE PERSON WHOM HE HAD SIGHTED. THE LAO SIDE TOLD THE INFORMANT TO KEEP QUIET AFTER HE CLAIMED THAT THE VILLAGE WHERE THE SIGHTING HAD TAKEN PLACE WAS NOT THE ONE WHERE THE METIS WAS FOUND BUT WAS IN A MUCH MORE REMOTE AREA.

4. ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] THE U.S. TEAM BECAME UPSET WHEN THE LAO SIDE REFUSED TO CONSIDER FURTHER SEARCHES IN AREAS BEYOND THOSE ALREADY COVERED. [REDACTED] ATTRIBUTED LAO HESITANCE IN THIS REGARD TO CONCERN THAT SUCH SEARCHES WOULD TAKE THE U.S. TEAM OVER WHAT THE OFFICIAL DESCRIBED AS THE "FREE ZONE" ALONG THE XEKONG PROVINCE BORDER WITH VIETNAM. [REDACTED] DESCRIBED THIS ZONE AS BEING INHABITED BY VARIOUS ETHNIC GROUPS, SOME OF WHOM DO NOT SPEAK LAO AND MOST OF WHOM DO NOT RECOGNIZE LAO AUTHORITY. ALSO, VIETNAM MAINTAINS A MILITARY PRESENCE IN THIS AREA, AS WELL AS INTERNMENT CAMPS FOR ANTI-GOVERNMENT RESISTANCE ELEMENTS. AS SUCH, [REDACTED] SAID THAT LAOS HAS NO CONTROL OVER THE ZONE, AND THE LAO SIDE IN THE

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SEARCH HAD NO AUTHORITY FROM THE LAO PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE TO ENTER THE AREA WITH OR WITHOUT U.S. PERSONNEL.

5. [REDACTED] COMMENT: A [REDACTED] WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SEPTEMBER 1991 INVESTIGATION IN LAOS DOES NOT BELIEVE THE LAO DELIBERATELY HINDERED HIS INVESTIGATION IN ANY WAY. IN HIS OPINION, THE LAO DISPLAYED MORE COOPERATION THAN USUAL. [REDACTED] SAID THE TEAM WAS NOT ABLE TO VISIT ATTAPEU PROVINCE BECAUSE OF FLOODING AND IMPASSABLE ROADS, BUT THE LAO INVITED THE TEAM TO RETURN WHEN THE ROADS WERE DRY. THE PERSON THE TEAM WANTED TO INTERVIEW WAS NOT LOCATED SIX DAYS AWAY, AS SUGGESTED IN THE REPORT, BUT NOT MORE THAN FOUR OR FIVE HOURS AWAY. THE TEAM SAW PHOTOGRAPHS OF THIS PERSON, WHO WAS NOT INTERVIEWED. [REDACTED] DISPUTED THE CLAIM THAT THE TEAM WAS UPSET BY NOT BEING ABLE TO VISIT ANOTHER AREA. THE TEAM ASKED TO VISIT AN AREA NOT PREVIOUSLY AGREED UPON BUT DID NOT EXPECT TO RECEIVE APPROVAL AND DID NOT DISPLAY ANNOYANCE AT THIS. [REDACTED] HE COULD NOT COMMENT ON THE VERACITY OF THE PARAGRAPH FOUR REASONS FOR NOT ALLOWING THE TEAM TO GO. HE SAID THAT AREAS FOR INVESTIGATION ARE GENERALLY AGREED ON PRIOR TO THE TEAM'S ARRIVAL IN LAOS, IN PART TO ALLOW TIME TO GET APPROVAL FROM BOTH THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND PROVINCIAL LEADERS. REGARDING PARAGRAPH TWO, IN [REDACTED] JUDGMENT LAO OFFICIALS WOULD NOT PAY TWO BANT-WEIGHT IN GOLD FOR PHOTOGRAPHS IF THEY WERE TRYING TO BE OBSTRUCTIVIST.)

6. [REDACTED]

7. CLASSIFIED BY SIGNER. DECL OADR DRV [REDACTED] ~~ALL SECRET~~

END OF MESSAGE

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