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Lao government, ethnic communities clash over development projects

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Phou Bia mountain viewed from from Xaysomboun province. Photo: Boroli, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

APRIL 9, 2021

The Lao government is reportedly ramping up military operations against Hmong communities in what appears to be an effort to secure land and resources for foreign investment and economic integration projects.

Editorial

New reports of Lao military operations against ethnic Hmong communities suggest the government is tightening its control over areas targeted for development and investment.

According to a *Radio Free Asia* **report** on April 1, Lao military forces have repeatedly attacked Hmong living around Phou Bia mountain in Xaysomboun province, north of Vientiane. Local sources and civil society advocates say the military campaign is an attempt to push the Hmong out to ensure that foreign investment projects and other government-backed initiatives can proceed unimpeded.

In March, one fighter with a group of unidentified gunmen was killed during **fighting** with Lao military forces in Xaysomboun. Following the attack, authorities in the province issued an order prohibiting anyone from entering the area from March 15-30 and the Lao military sent in reinforcements, blocking roads around Thathom district. On March 19, local officials **declared** three villages in Thathom to be “developed”, citing significant production of paddy rice and animal husbandry, according to the government-backed *Vientiane Times*.

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and the Congress of World Hmong People (CWHP) have **documented** a rise in conflict and military operations around Phou Bia and other Hmong communities since 2016.

“This escalation of violence coincides with a push towards the development of Phou Bia Mountain as both a tourist site and an area of interest to foreign investment,” a UNPO official **told** *Radio Free Asia*. “The government continues to deny any wrongdoing and refuses access by

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international observers, even on humanitarian or medical grounds.”

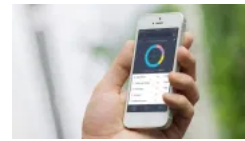
The recent conflict between the Lao government and Hmong communities appears to be tied to plans for economic integration and investment projects, including mining, logging, hydropower and tourism. Phou Bia itself is slated for a government tourism **initiative** worth an estimated US\$500 million, with the goal of “stimulating tourism in the region, while promoting environmental conservation and rural development” via the region’s natural resources and biodiversity.

The Lao state’s plans for economic development focus on using foreign-backed infrastructure projects to drive productivity and new industries in areas that were previously far from the country’s economic centers, whether through agriculture, industry or resource extraction.

This “land into capital” policy now centers on initiatives like the US\$6 billion China-Laos **railway** and a string of 12 economic zones connected by the railway and other corridors under China’s Belt and Road Initiative. As Laos seeks to secure these plans and prepare upland areas for economic integration, the government is ramping up efforts to assert active control of ethnic minority communities.

Reports of conflict draw UN inquiry

The Phou Bia Hmong communities have had a tenuous relationship with the Lao government since the CIA recruited thousands of Hmong to fight against the Pathet Lao in support of the American war in Vietnam. Xaysomboun was the site of the CIA’s base of operations in Laos in the 1960s and early 1970s and Long Tieng, as it was called, hosted thousands of Hmong soldiers recruited and trained by Major General Vang Pao and other allies for the US anti-communist war effort.



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The base was key in the US “secret war” in Laos, in which American bombers infamously **dropped** the equivalent of one planeload of bombs every eight minutes for nine years, making Laos the most heavily bombed country in the world.

The group that has reported military activity around Phou Bia are the Hmong ChaoFa, a Christian sect that emerged in the late 1950s and now call for the establishment of their own federated state within Laos.

The recent rise in military activities and forced displacement in the Lao uplands has garnered significant UN attention. Last October, 10 UN special rapporteurs sent a **letter** to the Lao government raising concerns about allegations of disappearances, repression and lack of access to food and water.



A dam on the Nam Ngum River. Photo: [Chaoborus](#) / CC BY-SA

“The allocation of land has involved land-grabbing practices that have forced many Hmong communities to relocate and deprived them of their subsistence means,” the letter read. “Moreover, they face extensive environmental problems. The construction of hydroelectric dams along the Nam Ngum River, as well as gold and silver mining and illegal wood logging have seriously affected the environment in the Phou Bia area.”

The letter came after a string of incidents affecting the Hmong community for which the government offered little explanation. The increased tensions began in November 2015 when a firefight broke out between government soldiers and an unidentified armed group and three soldiers and four civilians were killed. The Lao military then **launched** a campaign in April 2016 to seize control of Hmong territories around Phou Bia, prompting allegations of land grabbing from the UNPO and ChaoFa.

The CWHP and ChaoFa have continued to report military activities nearly every month since, including over the past year. Last March, four Hmong civilians **disappeared** after arriving at a checkpoint in western Laos as they attempted to leave the area and in June, a Lao military soldier sent to inspect illegal opium fields in Xaysomboun was shot and killed. The military then **attacked** the Phou Bia area in August with around 100 soldiers in an effort to suppress ChaoFa activities, according to the group.

The UNPO estimates that budgets for development in Xaysomboun now run into the hundreds of millions of dollars and alleges that the Lao government is using development as a pretext to push discriminatory policies against the Hmong.

In a statement in August 2020, the UNPO **wrote** that the Chinese Communist Party is “exporting repressive policies beyond its borders, leading client states...to undertake extreme repression against their national minorities as an indirect result of massive Chinese investment as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.”

Though the Hmong have long been marginalized by the Lao state, the increased repression is more likely a consequence of imposing a particular model of economic development rather than an explicit goal in itself. Highways, economic zones, railway construction and new agricultural plantations in Laos have all been marred by accusations of land grabs and rights violations, both against ethnic minorities and ethnic Lao. However, minority groups may be impacted more heavily due to structural inequities and the fact that many communities rely on their land for subsistence.

In the case of Phou Bia and the ChaoFa, the extent of any displacement or land grabs remains unclear due to the country’s intense repression of media and the lack of government transparency.

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