



# Laos: Radio Under Fire

*by Manosij Guha*

Once a backwater of the former French Indochina, Laos is still largely untouched by western influence. Its measured pace of life is as sluggish the muddy Mae Nam Mae Khong—the Mekong River.

For centuries, Laos has been a buffer between powerful kingdoms that played its gentle people against each other, like pawns in a devious chess game. The early history of

Laos was especially dominated by migrating Shan, Siamese, Lao and Hmong, who depleted much of the forest cover through slash and burn agriculture.

There was infighting among the early Lao principalities, but they eventually banded together to repel the Mongol hordes of Kublai Khan. Laos was first unified in 1353 under the rule of Fa Ngum, a ferocious

Khmer protégé who consolidated principalities around Luang Prabang to form Lan Xang. The kingdom initially became prosperous, but by the 17th century internecine quarrels and interference from neighbors balkanized it into three smaller principalities.

By the end of the 18th century, most of Laos was under Siamese suzerainty, but the region was also coveted by Annam, part of today's Vietnam. In the 1820s, fed up with both oppressors, the country unwittingly went to war against powerful Siam. This proved so disastrous that both Laos and Annam fell under Siamese control, reducing Laos to a Siamese vassal state until the 1890s.

### French Create Indochina

By the late 19th century, France had created French Indochina from the Vietnamese provinces of Tonkin and Annam. Unwilling to take on the might of the French empire, Siam eventually ceded all of Laos to France, which treated it as a protectorate within Indochina.

The French had no interest in developing Laos, so they relegated it to be governed by the Vietnamese civil service—a practice which continues to this day. The French then used the territory as a buffer to thwart the opportunistic designs of Siam, as well as potential British expansionism from Burma in the north and Malaya to the south.

With the advent of World War II, Japanese troops overran Indochina. In order not to return the territory to French rule, a Lao resistance group, Lao Issara, was formed, which ultimately led Laos to independence in 1953. But conflict soon erupted among royalist, neutralist and communist factions. The next few years saw bitter civil war, with foreign interference stoking hostilities.



**Dy Sisombath, the “Father of Lao Radio,” relies on hard-copy documents.**

M. Guha

**In the 1950s several democratic countries donated broadcasting equipment.**



**Designated as a world heritage site by UNESCO, Luang Prabang was once a jewel in the crown of French Indochina. Now, with its idyllic vistas and a laid-back lifestyle, it is a paradise where time stands still.** M. Guha



**Khmu newscaster at rough-and-ready Houa Phan Provincial Radio Station, Sam Neua.** M. Guha

### War Devastates Region

By 1957, pro-communist Pathet Lao rebels had advanced into the north and were bidding for power. By the early 1960s, they had aligned themselves with the Soviet Bloc and were being actively aided by the USSR and North Vietnam.

Washington was concerned about communist advances, but was unwilling to become visibly involved. Instead, the Central Intelligence Agency was tapped to covertly aid the Royal Lao Government. The "secret war" that followed ran from 1964 to 1969.

With the Vietnam War in high gear, American bombing in eastern Laos targeted the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the major communist supply route. But in the process, it also obliterated nearby Lao towns, cities and villages, creating vast civilian casualties and flows of refugees. By the cease-fire of 1973, Laos had earned the sad distinction of being the most bombed country on Earth.

### French Inaugurate Broadcasting

Laos was a tardy entrant to radio broadcasting, perhaps a result of its low standing within the French Indochina colonial administration. The first Lao station was set up, unofficially, in 1950 on 7215 kHz with a

one kilowatt shortwave transmitter provided by the French. In April 1952, it was officially opened by Prince Souvanna Phouma in Vientiane, from where Lao National Radio still operates.

In reality, the building was ceremoniously inaugurated much later. An almost hidden inscription in concrete near the entrance reads, translated, "This stone was laid by His Highness Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prime Minister of Laos, on 27th January 1996."

### Yanks, Brits, Aussies and Germans Pitch In

In 1954, the Eisenhower administration donated a second one kilowatt shortwave transmitter to Lao National Radio. This was followed in 1957 by a five kilowatt medium-wave AM transmitter on 1340 kHz to complement existing world band frequencies of 6130 and 7145 kHz.

The United States also loaned a ten kilowatt shortwave transmitter in 1960 for use on 6150 kHz. According to one recollection a second identical transmitter was also loaned, but no record of its operation has been found.

Not to be left behind, in 1964 the British government donated Marconi transmitters and provided scholarships for training engineers. The equipment was installed in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Pakse, but the transmitter in Vientiane, and probably others, were destroyed in a coup in February 1965. To make up for these losses, USAID donated a 50 kilowatt transmitter, with more being provided by ally Australia in 1965.

By 1966, Lao National Radio was broadcasting over 13 hours a day in two separate transmissions. Programs were mostly in Lao, with music and features for the army and farmers, as well as educational programs. These were supplemented by programs in Vietnamese and French.

Monitoring Times  
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**Wired loudspeakers reach out without fail, but Sam Neua's "flamethrower" transmitter sputters on and off. Even when operating it wanders off frequency.** M. Guha



Two years later, Lao National Radio, sometimes identifying as Radio Laos, operated from Vientiane using a 25 kilowatt Philips shortwave transmitter provided by German aid. This transmitter still exists in derelict condition at the KM6 transmitting station.

Three mediumwave AM transmitters aired the same content: Luang Prabang at 2.5 kilowatts, and Vientiane and Pakse at ten kilowatts each. Everything originated at the Vientiane studios, with the same programs carried on shortwave and mediumwave AM simultaneously in a rudimentary national grid.

This continued well into 1972 when a different, unnamed, station began operating from Luang Prabang. Yet another station began construction at Savannakhet in the south, close to the Thai border. In all, four different radio stations, each managed by a separate coalition partner, could be heard. As each relayed a bit of the other's programming, the mix resembled a joint operation.

All would broadcast about 12 hours daily, with extended hours on weekends. Programs were primarily in Lao tongues, but some were in French, usually prepared by the French foreign ministry in Vientiane. They included traditional and modern Lao

music, political talks, broadcasts from the National Assembly, news in French, children's stories, special programs for housewives, and several hours of in-school curricula and adult literacy courses.

The Laos Second System station, which seemingly broadcast from Luang Prabang, aired in Khmu and other dialects, as well as Cambodian, Vietnamese and French. The third station, Radio of the Lao Kingdom in Luang Prabang, relayed news from "Radio Pathet Lao" and Vientiane.

Sieng Santisouk (Voice of Peaceful Laos), probably from Pakse, was—until 1975—the fourth outlet. Like the third station, it included programs from Vientiane and "Radio Pathet Lao."

### **Lao Radio Today**

Domestically, Lao National Radio transmits only from the capital, Vientiane. Provincial centers independently manage their own radio stations, albeit under the aegis of the Ministry of Information and Culture, with technical and material help from the federal Department of Mass Media.

"Unlike other socialist countries, the government of the Lao PDR operates a decentralized broadcasting infrastructure,"

points out Dy Sisombath, the genial network planning manager of the Department of Mass Media. Sisombath, who is a walking encyclopedia of Lao broadcasting, adds, "Provincial broadcasting is controlled by the Provincial Committee, which is headed by the Governor."

These broadcast centers exist in the provincial capitals of Luang Prabang, Sam Neua, Attapeu, Luang Namtha, Saiyabouli, Muang Khong, Thakek, Savannakhet and Pakse. They operate on mediumwave AM or FM or both but, either way, all must relay news from Vientiane.

Among provincial outlets, only Sam Neua has a presence on the world band airwaves. The shortwave transmitter in Luang Prabang has been phased out, while the one in Xeing Khoung was bombed.

### **Sam Neua: Flamethrower Radio**

Today's Radio Station of Houa Phan Province is located on Transmitter Hill, looking down on Sam Neua. The arduous uphill hike is a challenge, but at least the language barrier is insurmountable—almost.

This where the language of love for radio kicks in. Phrase books, hand signs, stick figure diagrams, drawing on the sand and even telephone calls to an English translator in Vientiane were all effective tools to understand these people and their fascinating culture.

The radio station itself is an oblong two-building affair with a shack in between. The place could easily be mistaken for a village school, given the multitude of children playing ball, but dipole masts and a rusty dish antenna point to the true purpose.

## CLANDESTINE BROADCASTING

By the late 1960s, Lao National Radio was the official voice of independent Laos, which was then governed by a diverse coalition of royalists, neutralists and communists. However, various Lao groups operated clandestine stations, such as "Radio of the Patriotic Neutralist Forces" on 4247v, 4575, 6273 and 8600v kHz. The CIA also participated actively, notably with "United Lao Races."

Later, black clandestine stations also appeared. These pretended to be operated by the enemy, so as to trick listeners and thus reduce the enemy's credibility or confuse. This concept reportedly fascinated then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who is said to have ordered the CIA to create a number of black stations for audiences in Vietnam and Laos. Among these was "Radio Khana Pathet Lao," which from July 1973 to February 1974 pretended to be an outlet for the Pathet Lao on 5012 kHz.

### **Dissident Broadcasting Continues**

This spirit of disestablishmentarianism continues even now. Since May 2002, United Lao Movement for Democracy, an American based pro-democracy group in St. Paul, Minnesota has been airing "Hmong Lao Radio" over powerful transmitters in such countries as Uzbekistan, Taiwan and the United Kingdom. Programs are in Hmong from 0100 to 0200 World Time Wednesdays and Fridays; frequencies change, but recently have been 9515 (formerly 11725) and 15260 kHz. According to their website, broadcasts are directed not only towards Southeast Asia, but also to North America where it has a sizeable diaspora.

Whether this is related to a similar station broadcasting from Thailand or the mountains of northern Laos remains to be proven.

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The building for technical facilities is normally inactive during the day. But by evening it becomes a hotbed of activity as the weary lone working transmitter is fired up—literally, as flames are actually visible, their hot tongues licking inside the transmitter case.

Two very small rooms serve as a basic studio, with simple cassette decks, mixers and microphones. All news and commentary are taped, but during transmission the voice audio and music tapes are mixed live by a technician. Television and FM are next door.

### Two Transmitters, One Works

There are two one kilowatt shortwave units of identical Sino-Russian vintage which were moved from the Vieng Xai cave in 1977. Plate markings state: "1 kilowatt SW CW + Phone Transmitter, Type 200A-1, Serial No. 64-082, Power Supply 380v 3 phase 50 c/s, Frequency Range 3-18 Mc/s. Power output 1 kilowatt." One is silent and pitiful, existing only to provide parts for the transmitter that still works.

Sam Neua operates from 2300 to 0130 and 1000 to 1230 World Time on nominal 4640

kHz, which drifts plus or minus 5 kHz, and FM 102.75 MHz. While FM normally relays Lao National Radio from Vientiane, short-wave usually carries locally produced programs, along with news relayed from Vientiane.

Besides Lao, much programming is in the Hmong and Khmu tongues of this hill tribe region. Local content often consists of news or commentary interspersed with generous doses of music. There is no advertising, but public service announcements are read during and after local newscasts.

### Signals Heard by Western DXers

Music requests are hugely popular at Sam Neua. "Each month over a thousand letters for requests are received, including from elsewhere in Laos and in neighboring Vietnam," beams Veeyang, a Hmong announcer and the only staffer who speaks good English, having once been a teacher.

World band DXers get into the act, too. Reception reports have come from as far afield as South America, Finland and Singapore, although most remain unanswered because of language difficulties and insufficient funds. However, a report translated into Lao or Hmong with suitable reply postage should eventually be verified.

The station has a staff of 17, including three Hmong, two Lao and two Khmu announcers. Also present are three engineers, including Khong Kham, an enigmatic character. At 52 he is probably the most senior transmitter engineer, having served since the days of cave broadcasts.

"I didn't really want to be a radio technician," he explains in Lao, using gestures to compensate for the language barrier. He was never formally trained in broadcast engineering, so everything he knows has been learned through bumps and scrapes.

He is a simple but dedicated man, with the onerous task of vandalizing a beloved



Engineer Khong Kham laments that his drifty transmitter lacks the keypad tuning of a Sony portable. M. Guha



**Sam Neua's family of vintage transmitters comprises two Russian-designed workhorses and a veteran from Mao's China. Engineering wizardry keeps all three from the scrap heap.**

M. Guha

transmitter for parts to keep his remaining baby alive. Still, frequent breakdowns agonize this surrogate father as he struggles to keep the last of his electronic family from the boneyard.

### **Vientiane, Studio Central**

Present-day Lao National Radio operates from a nondescript 1954 building on Phangkham Road in Vientiane's Chantabouli district. This quiet government quarter was once the village of Ban Si Saket, named after a local Buddhist monastery.

We are greeted by Inpanh Satchaphansy, who wears many hats: Deputy Head of the Foreign Desk, Head of External Relations and Head of the English Language Service. Other employees include 60 technicians and another 100 or so program staff and journalists.

One studio is for live on-air announcements and playouts; it doubles as master control. Other studios, for recording and editing, include digital audio workstations and servers which replaced analog tape systems in 2000. Two-channel Marti VHF links

connect to shortwave and mediumwave AM transmission facilities on the city's outskirts.

Studio modernization has been funded in part by the Japanese agency JICA, underscoring the crucial role foreign aid has played in the station's development. Sweden, for example, underwrote a pilot project from 2000 to 2003. And a number of producers have received Australian government scholarships.

### **Domestic Services Grow**

From a mere 14 hours of programs a day in 1975, Lao National Radio has grown to over 40 hours. The domestic service of Lao National Radio airs regionally from 2200 to 0830 and 0930 to 1500 World Time on 6130 kHz from a 50 kilowatt shortwave transmitter, and locally on 576 kHz mediumwave AM and 103.7 MHz FM.

Programming is mainly in Lao, with Hmong and Khmu segments thrown in twice daily. English language lessons can be heard from 1300 to 1315 World Time, followed by French lessons to 1330. Commercials have been allowed only since 1995.

**Cattle with loud bells sometimes do a better job than paid guards in protecting Lao National Radio's KM6 facility.**

M. Guha



Vientiane has a second station, Vientiane City Radio. This is operated by the municipality on 105.5 MHz FM and 640 kHz mediumwave AM using their own facilities.

### **International Service Loses Relay**

The International Service broadcasts for five hours daily, with half-hour segments each in Vietnamese, Khmer, Thai, French and English—English is at 0600-0630 and 1330-1400 World Time. The regional audience is reached by a ten kilowatt shortwave transmitter on 7145 kHz, while 97.25 MHz is available for local listeners.

This is a plunge from the station's former grandeur, when the International Service put out powerful world band signals. From 1987 to 1991, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was relayed to Europe by a pair of beefy transmitters within the USSR.

### **Shortwave Site Feeds Cows**

Transmitter sites in Laos are named after the distance in kilometers from its studio. Therefore, the shortwave transmitting

station for Vientiane is called "KM6," or six kilometers from the studios in downtown Vientiane. KM6 can be reached by rickety tuk-tuk—a motorcycle-fronted people carrier that jounces along winding village roads and dirt paths.

Engulfed by the village of Ban Chommany Neuk is the facility's fenced but unguarded compound. Its large antenna farm is shared with cattle which, like their BBC Monitoring counterparts at Caversham Park, keep the grass trim by grazing between masts.

Two Marti VHF link receivers, in a small rack, receive program feeds from the Vientiane studios on 243 and 245 MHz, respectively. Unused are vintage Australian STC rack receivers and measurement and patch panels. Adjacent to the control room is a large transmitter hall, now largely empty but which once held numerous mediumwave AM and shortwave transmitters.

### **Hardware Diaspora**

The exodus of transmitters from KM6 has been worthy of a latter-day Leon Uris.

JRC  
full-page ad  
"NRD-545"



**A derelict Phillips (left) stands mute alongside the new CEC at the KM6 facility.** M. Guha

Sysamone Phommaxay, the facility's Soviet educated engineer, relates the history to PASSPORT.

First to go was a Soviet 175 kilowatt mediumwave AM unit, installed in 1959. That was sent to the scrap heap. Next, a five kilowatt shortwave transmitter, also

Russian, suffered the same fate in 1994. Then, in 2001, a Chinese ten kilowatt mediumwave AM rig was transferred to the new Thakek station.

A newer Marconi transmitter was moved down the road in 2003 to replace Vientiane City Radio's original kilowatt on 702 kHz. This came on the air in 2004 on the replacement frequency of 640 kHz to overcome mutual interference with Luang Prabang on 705 kHz. The replacement was described to us as ten kilowatts, but signal strength makes it seem more like one kilowatt. Possibly the new transmitter is not yet in operation.

Finally, laments engineer Phommaxay, an aged ten kilowatt mediumwave AM transmitter was plucked from its foundation. Made by STC of Australia, it was discarded in 2002.

### Corner Reveals Old Workhorse

Only two functioning shortwave transmitters remain at KM6, so enough space is left for future expansion. However, at present the area is earmarked for recreation, as could be deduced from a ping-pong table.

What intrigues the nostalgic interloper is none of this, but rather something lurking in

**With its motorcycle front and cattle-cart back, the "tuk-tuk" is named after the sound it makes. People share seats with pigs and chickens.**

M. Guha



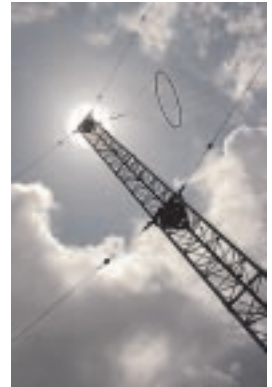
a damp, dark corner. Here lies a very large, very heavy and very derelict transmitter in three stages, each big enough to pass as a butcher's freezer.

This is Radio Laos' old 25 kilowatt Philips manufactured in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. As emblazoned on a plaque, it was part of a German aid program to the Royal Lao Government in 1968. Once the station's workhorse, this beefy sender was finally retired about 1993, because transmitter tubes had become too costly and scarce. This has also made redundant its three-tower helical antenna—once state-of-art—as its fixed beam heading was to the former priority targets of Vietnam and China.

The domestic program load has since been transferred to a newer 50 kilowatt shortwave transmitter, which is as large as the old Philips and occupies the space next to it. Though made by Continental Electronics Corporation of Dallas, it was procured in 1987 from Lao Telstra, a subsidiary of the Australian telecom giant Telstra. There were no direct trade relations between the United States and Laos, but the Australians cheerfully served as go-between.

The Continental transmitter operates from 2.3 to 16 MHz, and during our visit its counter showed 36,865.5 hours of operation. The core is a hybrid, with one large tube and the rest solid state. When running, it produces considerable heat, so it is cooled by an elaborate water system.

Also installed by Telstra were two shortwave antennas from TCI of Sunnyvale, California. These are omnidirectional, using an inverted cone centered around a single high tower. One is a TCI-613 fed by the 50 kilowatt shortwave transmitter for Laos National Radio's domestic service on 6130 kHz.



**Unused antenna stands silent at station KM6.**

M. Guha

**Exodus from KM6 has been worthy of a latter-day Leon Uris.**



**Engineer Sysamone Phommaxay leads a twilight tour of the antenna farm at transmitting station KM6.**

M. Guha

## CAVEMAN RADIO

Remote northern Houa Phan province, dotted with verdant hills and limestone cliffs, is located along the Vietnamese border. The provincial capital is small and picturesque Sam Neua, with the gentle Nam Sam river flowing by. It occupies a world of its own, all but cut off from the rest of the country except for biweekly flights on Lao Airline's overgrown crop duster.

The other way to reach Sam Neua is from Vientiane by bus or *songthiao*—a truck modified to carry people. This takes about three days, but meanders through bandit-ridden mountain terrain where even locals fear to tread.



**Picturesque Sam Neua, with Lego-like huts dotting verdant hills.** M. Guha

This is the setting for Laos' most important and intriguing chapter in radio broadcasting. Here, a clandestine station operated against impossible odds and finally became the beleaguered nation's official broadcaster.

Twenty nine kilometers from the provincial capital of Sam Neua on Route 5 is impenetrable karst topography riddled with the caves of Vieng Xai. These are adjacent to a tiny town of the same name, and is literally the end of the road. These caverns were once home to clandestine "Radio Pathet Lao" of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front), the communist independence

movement formed by "Red Prince" Souphanouvong in 1951. The caves also served as Pathet Lao headquarters and domicile for the Chinese ambassador.

The station was active until August 1960, but once the Front joined the coalition it was integrated with Lao National Radio. However, it was revived that December when the coalition broke up. It continued until December 2, 1975, when Pathet Lao forces overthrew the monarchy and created the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

### Broadcasts Aided by Hanoi

Pathet Lao lore has it that after the start of American bombing, all broadcasts were heroically transmitted from the "radio cave" until the communist takeover. The less romantic reality is that at least some transmissions were from the Voice of Vietnam facility, as was underscored when it was damaged during a 1972 bombing of Hanoi. To this day the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese authorities have avoided addressing this awkward point.

Dense overgrowth makes the old broadcast cave virtually inaccessible; in any



**Superb piloting allows Lao Airlines to provide safe service under fearsome conditions.**

M. Guha

event, all artifacts were removed after the war. But in its heyday it is said to have secreted several one kilowatt Sino-Russian communications transmitters, which originally were for sending messages to Pathet Lao units across the country.

Later, in 1967-8, it took on the mantle of broadcaster and started transmitting on a regular schedule. Programs were initially in Lao, but Vietnamese and French were added later. The station staff was enthusiastic but untrained, consisting of eager intellectuals, teachers and monks.

### Caves Provided Autonomy

The Pathet Lao leadership started using these caverns in 1964 because they are virtually unassailable by air. Wooden walls and floors, as well as natural rock formations, divided the caverns into bedrooms, meeting rooms, artillery and weapons storage areas, and various other spaces. Most had an airtight chamber which could be sealed during an air raid, with oxygen being artificially generated by a Russian device.

One of the deepest caves housed the hospital, while others held weaving mills, printing presses and other facilities so the Pathet Lao could be self-sufficient. Tunnels connected the caverns and even extended to elegant houses the leaders built in front of their respective caves. Electricity was provided by nearby Vietnam, just as it is today in this region.

There was considerable fear that Americans would use bunker-busting chemical bombs to demolish the Pathet Lao's hideout. However, what was dropped, instead, was a relatively benign mixture of detergent and herbicides to make the mountain roads slippery.

### Visitors Face Grim Reminder

After the war, the deposed royal family suddenly disappeared during massive retaliations against Hmong and other former enemies of the Pathet Lao. They are presumed to have been sent to die in the area, where there is a surprising reminder of this grim period. A nearby "reeducation" camp, built by the Vietnamese in 1973, has been turned into what is surely one of the world's most grotesque hotels.

Among the various shortwave transmitters in the caves of Vieng Xai, at least two were sent to nearby Sam Neua and another to Luang Prabang. Of these, the unit in Luang Prabang has since been decommissioned. Only one in Sam Neua continues to soldier on, serving the remote region as its provincial radio service.



**Emboweled within the caves of Vieng Xai, reenactors relive "Pathet Lao Radio's" heyday.**

M. Guha (awaiting photo from Guha)



**Pathet Lao tunnels were hewn using primitive tools.**

M. Guha





**Station through unattended gate.**

M. Guha

### Japan Radio Transmitter

The second, TCI-615, is fed by a small ten kilowatt solid state transmitter from the same Japan Radio Company famous for tough world band receivers. Obtained in 2000, perhaps as part of the JICA aid that funded studio digitization in Vientiane, the unit is noiseless and energy efficient. Normally, it carries the International Service on 7145 kHz.

A key feature is that the transmitter is keypad-tuneable from 3.2 to 29 MHz with almost no warmup time, as compared to the half-hour warmup for the Continental. When the more powerful Continental transmitter acts up and the JRC isn't being used for the International Service, the Japanese unit

instantaneously takes over for the domestic audience.

At these times the domestic service is heard at reduced power and with different modulation, so the swap is apparent to listeners. Additionally, provincial stations relay the Vientiane news twice daily. If the satellite feed isn't available, they use the regular domestic shortwave frequency. So, when the shortwave signal drops in power because the JRC transmitter has replaced the Continental, the quality of relayed newscast audio from provincial stations sometimes also suffers.

### Laid Back Operation

About ten people work at the station. This includes an engineer who lives in a red hut nearby, along with six assistants, a groundskeeper who seems to have delegated his work to cattle wandering in, and two conveniently absent security men deputized from the village police station.

Although there is plenty of room for more transmitters, future expansion at this site is unlikely as the surrounding village has almost engulfed it. Too, there are plans to build a road through the antenna farm. Even the mediumwave AM site of KM49 has no room to grow. "I think the likely place for expansion is the KM52 station, which has enough space," muses Dy Sisombath of the Mass Media Dept. "Incidentally, I was born in the village next to it. It is called Ban Labhasipsong, or Village 52, too," he chuckled.

A 100 kilowatt shortwave transmitter is planned, apparently for KM52, but with a big "if": They first have to locate a donor or receive a budget appropriation. No one is holding their breath.

### Transmitter That Didn't Exist

A similar scene unfolds at the KM4 transmitting station in the village of Ban

Tankhalok, just outside the picturesque royal capital of Luang Prabang. The control room has many receiving and monitoring racks in an odd mix that includes unused Eddystone receivers. Also on hand, from Amalgamated Wireless of Sydney, Australia, are HR21 single sideband telephone receivers probably once used to pick up program feeds; an HZ301 shortwave receiver for the Radio Telephone Terminal Unit; and an audio rack with a distortion/ noise meter.

The only items that appear new and operational are the two Marti VHF link receivers that feed VHF link transmitters operating at the studio end on 155.5 and 150.5 MHz, respectively. These, in turn, feed the new ten kilowatt solid state Harris DX-10 mediumwave AM transmitter next door on 705 kHz.

The cavernous original transmitter hall is dark and empty except for the technicians' laundry drying on a clothesline. But lovers of cobwebs are rewarded when stepping into one of the anterooms. Here rests an old Chinese shortwave transmitter, still intact with its resplendent knobs and dials. This, of course, was once a big secret as it officially didn't exist—it was one of the two transmit-



**Two Marti VHF link receivers.**

M. Guha

ters Mao's China surreptitiously furnished to "Radio Pathet Lao."

After the revolution ended in 1975, it was dispatched to Xeing Khoung in central Laos. However, it was then hastily moved to Luang Prabang because of heavy American bombardment. For a number of years it relayed the provincial service on the relatively clear frequency of 6970v kHz, but was finally taken off the air in 1999.



**Transmitting station in the village of Ban Tankhalok.**

M. Guha

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2-page spread ad  
"perfect for travelling"

Etón  
2-page spread ad  
"perfect for travelling"