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11th man arrested in California on Laos coup plot

Thu Jun 14, 2007 8:33PM EDT

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By Suzanne Hurt

SACRAMENTO, California (Reuters) - U.S. agents arrested an 11th man on Thursday in a suspected plot to overthrow the government of Laos on a day when a federal grand jury also handed down charges against all the men.

Agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives arrested Dang Vang, 48, at his residence in the central California city of Fresno, said Nina Delgadillo, an ATF spokeswoman.

He joins 10 others -- nine of them ethnic Hmong -- arrested earlier this month on charges of violating the federal Neutrality Act by planning a military attack designed to oust the communist government in Laos.

A federal grand jury handed down the charges against the 11 California residents on Thursday, and the case documents included an alleged "plan of action" for what was called "Operation Popcorn," short for "Political Opposition Party's Coup Operation to Rescue a Nation."

The document outlined budget costs of tens of millions of dollars in what the U.S. government portrays as a cloak-and-dagger operation worthy of a Hollywood spy drama.

"Federal law is without equivocation: you cannot conspire to overthrow a foreign government with whom our nation is at peace," U.S. Attorney McGregor Scott said in a statement. "Many means may be used to effectuate change; committing serious crime, however, is not one."

Most prominent among those charged is Vang Pao, 77, a leader of ethnic Hmong in the United States. The Southern California resident is a former general in the Royal Lao Army and led a CIA-trained mercenary army during the Vietnam War.

The communist government gained power in Laos in 1975 after the United States pulled out of Southeast Asia and ended the war. Ethnic Hmong living in Laos' remote mountainous areas bordering Vietnam had supported the U.S. effort.

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A complaint filed in federal court in Sacramento said the men sought to spend millions of dollars on Stinger missiles, mines, automatic rifles and anti-tank missiles. **Continued...**


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