

Hopes of Arranging Laos Peace Negotiations Dim

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The prospects for a separate settlement of the war in Laos have receded again with another failure by representatives of Vientiane and the Communist led Pathet Lao to agree on conditions for peace negotiations during two months of desultory contacts here.

The key issues remain the presence in Laos of 60,000 to 70,000 North Vietnamese troops and United States aerial bombardments in support of Laotian Government forces and to halt the transport of North Vietnamese troops and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail down the eastern Laotian border to southern Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam.

In the contacts here between the Pathet Lao's delegate, Prince Souk Vongsak, and the Premier of Laos, Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Pathet Lao yielded ground on its original insistence that peace talks could not begin until the Americans halted all bombing in Laos and all other military aid to the Laotians.

Prince Souk at first scaled down demands to a halt of bombing in two Communist-dominated provinces, Xiengkhouang, and Samneua. Eventually, he reduced this to Xiengkhouang, where Prince Souvanna had proposed that peace talks be held in the village of Khangkhay. The old demand for full American withdrawal was not raised again.

Prince Souk asked that bombings stop for a period starting 10 days before the talks and ending seven days after them. He suggested that a cease-fire be enforced over the length of a security corridor six miles wide between Khangkhay and the Pathet Lao's capital, the town of Samneua.

The Pathet Lao's delegate also wanted security at Khangkhay maintained only by its own troops and asked that the meetings there be held between a personal representative of Prince Souphanouvong, head of the Pathet Lao, and a personal representative of Prince Souvanna. Through the latter demand, Prince Souk sought to avoid accepting Vientiane's rep-

resentative as a plenipotentiary of the Government here, which the front does not recognize as the Government of Laos.

Under a 1962 Geneva agreement to neutralize Laos, a coalition government was formed. It was headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma, a neutralist, with Prince Souphanouvong, the head of the Pathet Lao, as deputy premier. But the Pathet Lao withdrew from the Government in 1963 and there has been intermittent fighting ever since.

Prince Souvanna has re-

fused the Pathet Lao's demand for an end to bombing in Xiengkhouang. Laotian leaders say that had he acceded to this demand, he would have left left North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops free to bolster their forces and to fortify the Plaine des Jarres and other parts of Xiengkhouang while the talks dragged on, as have the Vietnam peace talks in Paris.

Prince Souvanna, however, reiterated his position. He said he would agree to an end to American bombings in Xiengkhouang or in any other area from which the North Vietnamese agreed to withdraw.

The Premier countered the Pathet Lao's proposal for security at Khangkhay. He suggested that the town and its environs be put under the International Control Commission, composed of representatives of Poland, India and Canada, and that it be made a cease-fire zone.

He accepted the idea of a security corridor to Samneua and said he would accept a cease-fire in and around the town during the peace talks.

When Prince Souk gave no definite reply to Prince Souvanna's counterproposals, the Premier suggested that the talks be held in Luang Pra-

bang, seat of King Savang Vatthana. The king is recognized by the Pathet Lao as the chief of the state of Laos.

At this stage, Prince Souk let for Samneua via Hanoi, presumably to confer with the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao leaders.

Thus, the latest contacts have left the two sides still far apart. The Pathet Lao continues to seek an advantage through an end to the United States bombing of a strategic area and the Laotian Government insists on a curtailment of the pre-eminent role of North Vietnamese troops on the Laotian Communist side.