

NY TIMES FEB 71

Laos a Battleground for Two Decades

Laos has been part of the Indochina battleground for more than two decades. After 56 years as a French protectorate and a Japanese occupation in 1945-46, Laos became an independent state in the French union in 1949.

The Pathet Lao, a Communist nationalist movement, rebelled against the Government in the early nineteen-fifties. The 1954 Geneva Conference ending the Indochina war restored peace and Laos was established as an independent state under a neutralist-Pathet Lao coalition.

Six years later, fighting erupted anew. The 1962 Geneva Agreement imposed a truce and supposedly guaranteed Laotian neutrality, but the accord broke down and fighting has continued off and on ever since.

The civil war has pitted the North Vietnamese-supported Pathet Lao against a Western supported neutralist-rightist coalition, with the Communists controlling the eastern part of the country, including the Ho Chi Minh supply route, and the Government the western part.

The constitutional parliamentary monarchy headed by King Savang Vatthana and Prince Souvanna Phouma, who has been Premier since 1962, receives about \$50-million in United States aid annually.

The population of Laos—2,825,000—is 95 per cent rural and is composed mostly of Lao and Thai-speaking mountain tribes. The land-

locked nation of 91,429 square miles is surrounded by Communist China, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and North and South Vietnam. Northern Laos is mainly jungle-covered mountains; southern lands are mainly arid limestone terraces.