

Laotian Leaders Reported Split On Issue of a Saigon Incursion

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Feb. 2—Reports here of a possible incursion by South Vietnamese troops against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos—so far unconfirmed—have revived differences within the nation's leadership over the conduct of the war in Laos.

Spokesmen for the Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and those officials who agree with him, have said they would disapprove of any such incursion because it would compromise the Government's neutralist position against the presence in Laos of any foreign troops.

It is on the basis of this opposition to any foreign incursions that the Premier has taken a strong stand against North Vietnamese troops in Laos.

But military sources here say most of the kingdom's military commanders would approve of an incursion by the South Vietnamese and, in fact, assert that there has long been a verbal agreement between a group of Laotian generals and their counterparts in Saigon under which the Laotians would neither oppose nor object to a South Vietnamese penetration of

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Laotian territory.

The same sources say that there is a similar understanding between Laotian and Thai generals and that Thai advisers and artillery and other special units have been on duty in Laos on this basis.

Since there has so far been no confirmation here that a South Vietnamese incursion into southern Laos has taken place or is planned, Prince Souvanna Phouma has said nothing on the subject.

However, Defense Minister Sisouk na Champassak said this morning that the Government would object to the move, although he admitted there was nothing it could do to oppose it physically.

"We have no people in the area," he said. "They have all fled and it is completely in the hands of the North Vietnamese for transportation purposes."

He said he opposed having the South Vietnamese or Thais join the war in Laos in a formal sense because "then there would be no Laos, just an international battlefield."

Condition Formed in 1962

Under the Geneva agreement of 1962, a coalition Government was formed in Laos. It was headed by a neutralist, Prince Souvanna Phouma. His half-brother, Prince Souvanouvong, leader of the pro-Communist Pathet Lao, was named Deputy Premier. However, in 1963, a rift developed and the Pathet Lao withdrew from the coalition. There has been intermittent fighting since then for control of the country although the Premier has maintained his neutralist position.

Mr. Sisouk said today that he felt as long as the Government held to its neutralist position, the Laotian Communists would respect that position and not attack Government base areas in the Mekong Valley. But he indicated that if the Communists were to attack that area, the picture would change and the Government would be justified in accepting any outside help it could get.

There has always been a vagueness about the Vientiane Government's neutralist position as maintained by Prince Souvanna Phouma. Thai artillery units have fought in Laos and specialists are on duty in many capacities. Ethnic Laotians from Thailand have been trained there, then brought to Laos to fight. South Vietnamese forces have crossed Laotian borders in the past. But formally, the Laotian Government has maintained a policy of noninvolvement.

Validity of Position

The Communists, in turn, have not attacked Mekong valley centers. Furthermore, their recognition of King Savang Vathana and their negotiations with Prince Souvanna Phouma give a certain validity to the Laotian Government's position.

The negotiations that have been going on to set up peace talks between the Government and the Communist-led Pathet Lao are based on the idea that a settlement can be reached that will reconstitute a coalition government between Laotian Communist and non-Communist factions on the basis of a neutral Laos.