

Potential Blow to Communists

Seeker of Peace in Laos

Souvanna Phouma

Nearly a decade ago, a slightly heavy-set, pipe-smoking head of state told President Kennedy that "in a few years we will see a Laos that will be neutral and ready to do its bit for peace in the world."

The prediction was offered by Prince Souvanna Phouma, then as now the Premier of Laos, a nation of three million people that has known little but war for more than 25 years. Yesterday the Prince's prediction appeared far from fulfillment as South Vietnamese troops, supported by American planes and artillery, drove into Laotian territory in hopes of crippling North Vietnamese supply routes into South Vietnam.

Prince Souvanna Phouma (pronounced POO-ma), deplored the action in a formal statement expressing his dismay "that foreign troops belonging to countries and governments that have all pledged to guarantee and defend the sovereignty, neutrality and inviolability of Laos have once more chosen to deliberately make use of Laotian territory as a field of battle."

The guarantees to which the Prince referred were signed in Geneva in 1962 by 14 nations — among them the United States, the Soviet Union, Communist China and North and South Vietnam.

Stability for a While

But stability was short-lived. In 1962, the pro-Communist Pathet Lao, led by Prince Souvanna Phouma's half brother, Prince Souphanouvong, abandoned its role in the three-way coalition Government and renewed the fighting, now in its 20th year.

Despite the continual struggle, the suave courtly, 69-year-old Prince Souvanna Phouma is still pursuing his vision of peace.

One of five half brothers, Prince Souvanna Phouma is a son of an oft-married Prince, Ouphat Bounkhong, and of Princess Thongsy. The Prince

was born on Oct. 7, 1901 in the royal capital, Luang Prabang and was first educated in French schools in Hanoi.

After studying at the College Paul-Bert and the Lycee Albert Sarraut, he was sent to France. He received the diploma of engineer-architect from the University of Paris and the diploma of engineer-electrician from the University of Grenoble.

In 1931 he returned to Laos, then a French protectorate, to spend the succeeding 19 years in the public works service. Just after the end of World War II, he joined with two of his half brothers, Prince Pethsarath and Prince Souphanouvong, to establish a provisional Government of free Laos.

Exile in Thailand

But French forces returned to Laos in 1946, and Prince Souvanna Phouma, who had been Premier, and other members of a movement known as Lao Issarak (Free Laos) went into exile in Thailand for three years.

When a treaty signed in July 1949, granted Laos the status of an independent state within the French union, Prince Souvanna Phouma returned from exile to offer his services to the royal Government.

For the next two years, he served in ministerial posts, and between 1951 and 1954, he served again as Premier, as well as President of the Council of Ministers and as Minister of Posts, Telecommunications, Planning and Information.

Under a treaty signed late in 1953, Laos had become an independent country within the French Union, and the Pathet Lao had begun attacks with the aid of Communist forces from Vietnam.

Prince Souvanna Phouma's Administration lasted until 1954, a year when the first Geneva agreement provided for the independence of Laos. From late in 1954 to late in 1955 Prince Souvanna Phouma served as Deputy Premier and Defense Minister, and was returned to the post of



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Perseveres in a quest for peace and stability.

Premier by election in 1956.

He was forced to resign in 1958, when pro-Communist elements showed increasing strength in elections. Prince Souvanna Phouma was named Ambassador to France and subsequently to Italy, but he returned to Laos in 1960 to become president of the National Assembly.

For a brief period that year, he was forced into exile in Cambodia by a leftist coup. In 1961, while civil war continued in Laos, an international conference on the future of the country began in Geneva, and late that year, Prince Souvanna Phouma was designated the head of a coalition Government that began to function in 1962.

In his inaugural address Prince Souvanna Phouma once again set forth a policy of neutrality and peaceful coexistence. He has sought ever since to bring about its realization.

The Prince was married on Aug. 2, 1933 to Aline-Claire Allard, whose father was French and whose mother was Laotian. The Prince's wife is a Roman Catholic as are the their four children. The Prince is a Buddhist. In his moments of relaxation from the administration of a turbulent country, he has enjoyed hunting and gardening.