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PARIS PEACE TALKS INTO FOURTH YEAR

A Red Proposal for Truce in Laos Is Only New Element

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PARIS, May 13—The Vietnam peace conference began its fourth year today with each side blaming the other for the failure to stop the killing.

Along with conflicting accounts of three years of frustration, both sides stood fast on previous positions with one exception. The Communists endorsed and clarified a new proposal by the Pathet Lao for a cease-fire in Laos, saying that it covered "all forces" in that country—including, by implication, the North Vietnamese.

They said the offer went beyond previous ones in that it proposed an immediate and general cease-fire and immediate talks on the restoration of a coalition government. On March 6 the Pathet Lao, the indigenous Communist group in Laos, offered to discuss those questions after the United States had unconditionally ended its bombing of Laotian territory.

Comment by Souvanna

The delegates of the United States and South Vietnam did not comment on the proposal. An American spokesman referred a questioner to an Agence France-Presse dispatch quoting Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Premier of Laos, as terming the offer interesting but calling also for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from his country.

The debate over the blame for the impasse here was begun by Xuan Thuy, Hanoi's delegate. Arriving for the 113th session at the French Government conference hall near the Arc de Triomphe, he told reporters:

"Efforts for peace made by Mr. Harriman and me were, unfortunately, fought by Mr. Nixon. He violated the agreement for an unconditional halt in the bombing and other acts of war against the North."

It was thought to be the first friendly comment from the Communist side about Averell Harriman, who was President Lyndon B. Johnson's chief negotiator here. He began talks with Mr. Thuy on May 13, 1968, soon after Mr. Johnson had announced a partial cessation of the bombing and his decision not to run for re-election.

Mr. Thuy declined then to discuss peace terms or meet with the South Vietnamese until the United States had promised "unconditionally" to halt the "bombing and all other acts of war" against North Vietnam.

Such a promise was conveyed to Mr. Thuy on Oct. 30, 1968, and made public in those terms, although the United States has since insisted that it made clear that reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam would continue.

Stephen Ledogar, the American spokesman, said at a news conference this evening that Mr. Thuy then agreed to negotiate with the Saigon Government. Immediately afterward, Mr. Ledogar added, the Communists refused to sit with Saigon's representatives.

"They try to sell the same horse twice," he declared. "If we jumped through the hoop for them now, they'd present new demands."

'Protective Reaction' Added

"Nothing has taken place under the Nixon Administration that did not take place under Johnson," he continued. "The only change was the phrase 'protective reaction'—a reference to the explanation given for the bombing of North Vietnamese sites viewed as threatening the safety of reconnaissance aircraft.

Nguyen Thanh Le, the North Vietnamese spokesman, gave a conflicting account of the Harriman episode, some of which he indicated had not been related previously.

The "tacit understanding" on reconnaissance flights was "a pure invention," he declared, adding: "North Vietnam is a sovereign country. It cannot let the United States or other countries infringe on its territory."

Mr. Harriman, he said, proposed that the four parties—the United States, North Vietnam, the Saigon Government and what was then called the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam—meet on Nov. 2, 1968.

"We agreed, after having received the accord of the F.L.N.," Mr. Le said. "But a little later the American delegate said he had run into a certain difficulty and proposed we meet Nov. 6."

The new date was accepted but the meeting did not take place, Mr. Le said, because the South Vietnamese delegation refused to sit in. "They raised the ridiculous question of the shape of the table," he added.

Eventually, he went on, "our side proposed a round table" and the four parties finally met in January.

Mr. Le did not refer to the fact that Nov. 5 was the date of the Presidential election in the United States. Some accounts have held that Saigon delayed the start of the talks in the expectation that President-elect Nixon would support a tough line.

Mr. Harriman was succeeded by Henry Cabot Lodge, who was succeeded in a temporary capacity by Philip C. Habib and was finally replaced by David K. E. Bruce. As the years have gone by there have been no changes in the fundamental positions.