

# Vietnam Outcome Seen Hasten

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VIENTIANE, April 30—The stunning North Vietnamese victory in Saigon leaves Laos the only remaining non-communist nation in the former French Indochina. And it is not likely to remain so much longer.

Even before capitalulated, most informed Laotians recognized that it was just a matter of time before the Communist Pathet Lao would take over this country's tenuous coalition government.

The effects of the Communist victories in the neighboring countries will be to shorten that time and, probably, insure that the Laotian take over will be basically peaceful.

There has been some minor fighting between Pathet Lao units and troops of what are called "the Vientiane side" and similar out-

bursts will undoubtedly take place again. But neither side seems to be prepared or think it necessary to fight a protracted battle for military victory in Laos.

Political leaders of the U.S.-backed Vientiane side are despondent and the morale of their military forces has never been lower.

Defense Minister Sisouk Na Champassak, the nominal rightist leader, when asked how he felt about the Communist victories in Cambodia and South Vietnam summed it up in one word: "bad".

The North Vietnamese-supported Pathet Lao, by contrast, appeared to be taking quiet satisfaction from the turn of events. Col. Phao Bounnaphol, the Pathet Lao delegate to the joint commission in charge of implementing the 1973 peace accord, said the Pathet Lao were "happy to

hear that now there is peace in the rest of Indochina."

In essence, the Vientiane side now fully realizes that it cannot expect adequate U.S. assistance to counter an all-out Communist effort. The Pathet Lao, understanding this, see no need to launch such an armed campaign.

Instead, the Pathet Lao are expected to continue the approach they have been using ever since the peace agreement was worked out in Vientiane in February 1973. This approach is variously described by western observers here as "encroachment," "pin pricks," "scratching," "probing," and "oozing."

Occasionally, these techniques involve a certain amount of gunplay, as took place recently at the important road junction of Sala Phou Khoun, 90 miles northwest of Vientiane.

[United Press International reported that new fighting had broken out at the junction, which is on the road between Vientiane and the royal capital of Luang Prabang.]

However, a number of observers believe that neither side is really interested in renewing large-scale combat now.

But what about North Vietnam? That's a question for which there's no answer now, just opinions.

"Anyone who thinks the North Vietnamese won't turn against Laos and Thailand now that they've won in South Vietnam is crazy," said Defense Minister Sisouk.

The North Vietnamese would be crazy to try to take on Laos on top of all their own problems in a country which has been all but destroyed in 30 years of war,"

## ing Full Pathet Lao Takeover

said a Western military observer who's spent more than 30 years in Southeast Asia.

There are said to be some 25,000 North Vietnamese soldiers currently in Laos. If Hanoi were to decide to intervene with its battle-tested forces again, no one in Vientiane doubts that they would smash their way to victory virtually overnight.

"With the North Vietnamese army fighting for them, the Pathet Lao could take over in two or three weeks," said Sisouk.

A number of impartial diplomatic observers in Vientiane now concede that even Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, who is supposed to be the neutral leader as well as the buffer between the two sides, has begun leaning toward the Pathet Lao.

Souvanna, 74, is recovering from a heart attack and

observers say that in his failing health he is drawing closer to his half brother, Prince Souphanouvong, 63 and nominal head of the Pathet Lao.

But Souvanna is not simply closing ranks with his brother out of related sentiment. He is apparently sincerely convinced that the only way for Laos to remain neutral and free of domination by its bigger neighbors, North Vietnam and Thailand, as well as China, the Soviet Union and the United States, is to maintain its coalition government at any cost.

As a result, whenever rightist and Pathet Lao forces clash, Souvanna orders the rightists to withdraw. Under the peculiar terms of the peace agreement, the prime minister can issue orders to the Vientiane side but not to Pathet Lao forces.

The United States has reduced its military aid to the rightists from \$300 million in 1973 to \$30 million. U.S. and rightist sources claim almost none of this aid is in the form of weapons or ammunition, but rather rations, uniforms, spare parts and fuel.

What North Vietnam provides the Pathet Lao remains unknown under the agreement. The North Vietnamese themselves do not admit to maintaining forces in Laos nor to assisting the Pathet Lao with arms and ammunition. The Pathet Lao's Col. Phao, when asked about this, said, "We don't get any military aid."

Phao insisted that the United States continued to supply the Vientiane side with arms and ammunition and that until this assistance stopped Laos would not be able to achieve the

national unity envisaged in the peace accords.

Curiously, if North Vietnam does decide to intervene in Laos, the outside power thought most likely to stand in its way this time would be China. There is a growing belief in Vientiane that the Chinese, like the Soviet Union and the United States, are interested in keeping Laos neutral and free of North Vietnamese domination.

Chinese army engineers have constructed a network of roads linking northwestern Laos with China's Yunnan province and they are currently completing a link between Luang Prabang, Laos' royal capital, and these existing roads.

Defense Minister Sisouk refused to discuss this road building. "I don't worry about the Chinese roads, and I don't want to talk about it," he said.