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Rightist Ministers, Officers Quit in Laos

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By Jacques Leslie
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VIENTIANE, May 9—Laotian Premier Souvanna Phouma said today that he has accepted the resignation of five to seven rightist Cabinet ministers and generals, a development that deals a major blow to the already-demoralized rightist element in Laos' coalition government.

The premier made the disclosure in an interview several hours after about 2,000 leftist demonstrators gathered in Vientiane's stadium to demand the resignation of five leading rightist Cabinet officials and seven rightist generals.

The demonstrators, a few of whom earlier threw rocks at the American embassy here and lowered the American flag from its staff outside the embassy building, also demanded that the U.S. Agency for International Development be withdrawn from Laos.

Both developments occurred amid a climate of rising tension.

The Communist-led Pathet Lao, who hold a dominant position in most of the country and share in the coalition government with the rightists, seem to have decided to intensify their campaign against the rightists following the Communist

victories in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

Souvanna Phouma did not reveal the names of the officials whose resignations he has accepted, but believed to be among them is Sisouk Champassak, the coalition government's minister of defense, who is considered the rightists' strongest leader. Two other important rightist leaders, Finance Minister Ngon Sananikone and Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, commander of Laos' 2d military region, are also believed to have resigned.

The premier denounced Sisouk during the interview. "The minister of defense

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SOUVANNA PHOUMA
. . . leaning left

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has never wanted to collaborate with the vice minister," said Souvanna Phouma. "The vice minister is always left out. So that creates a certain animosity . . . It is necessary to suppress this."

The resignation of Sisouk and Vang Pao, who is considered the only effective commander in the Vientiane army, is a major step in the dismantling of the Vientiane armed forces.

Many rightist leaders submitted their resignations earlier in the week in the wake of increasing criticism from the Pathet Lao, but it was thought that the act was a formality.

Explaining his decision to accept some of the resignations, Souvanna Phouma said, "You cannot go against the current. When people are criticized, it is always with some reason. It is necessary to give satisfaction for the moment. What is most precious is to safeguard the peace and general reconciliation."

Asked about the demand Pathet Lao officials first made Wednesday that the U.S. AID mission here be withdrawn, the premier said, "It is not to close AID; it is only to diminish its importance."

The AID presence has dropped from 427 officials to 216 since the cease-fire began more than two years ago. Asked about the demand that AID withdraw, a senior U.S. embassy official said, "As far as I can determine, it does not represent the policy of the Lao government."

The official said he had protested to the Laotian government "the fact that there was inadequate police protection" as demonstrators passed by the U.S. embassy today.

After lowering the American flag, the demonstrators continued toward Vientiane's stadium, chanting as they walked. One group stopped in front of shops, threw rocks and ripped down all signs not written in the Lao language.

Many demonstrators appeared to be high school students, not particularly politically sophisticated. When they passed by the mission of the Polish delegation to



MINISTER SISOUK

. . . denounced by premier

the International Commission of Supervision and Control, a few yelled "CIA dogs!" at the startled Poles.

Demonstrators carried banners attacking the United States, the CIA and rightist officials including Sisouk, a defense minister and Sananikone, the finance minister.

The demonstration took place even though it had been banned at a Laotian Cabinet meeting Wednesday. Asked to confirm that the Cabinet had prohibited the demonstration, Souvanna Phouma explained, "yes, but it was a little late. I asked the leaders to come and see me yesterday. Alas, they had already asked people to come, so I said, 'Keep discipline.'"

The events of the last few days here suggest that the Pathet Lao's strategy is to divide the rightist by attacking their strongest leaders and forcing them out of the government. It is apparently hoped that these will be replaced by officials more pliant to Pathet Lao demands.

This may well happen. Souvanna Phouma said the replacements of those who had resigned would probably be young people who are "pure technicians."

Souvanna Phouma, 73, who has acted as a mediator between the two sides, appears to be leaning more and more toward the Pathet Lao as its power increases. Some observers believe he is doing this because he thinks it is the only way to achieve his major goal, reunification of Laos.