

Laotian Left Says It Wants Coalition Rule to Continue

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VIENTIANE, Laos, May 13—The fragile coalition that has ruled Laos for 13 months appeared to be holding together today as various elements expressed their support for the Government on the eve of a crucial cabinet meeting.

A senior official of the Communist-led Pathet Lao reaffirmed the group's decision to continue the coalition government and to replace the acting defense minister, a Pathet Lao, with a rightist.

"We want the coalition to continue; it will continue," he said.

In the last few days, all the major powers represented here, including North Vietnam, have apparently been quietly expressing support for continuing the coalition concept. That concept was endangered in the last week by resignation of four right-wing Government ministers, by street demonstrations and by a political assassination.

Prince to Ask Support

The new shape of the Government may be clarified after the meeting of the Cabinet, the first since the weekend resignations, when the Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, is expected to call for support of his Government.

The coalition may be preserved, but the shape of the Government is expected to be somewhat different. As Government ministries opened for business on the first working day since the resignations and turmoil began, desk after desk was vacant. Many Officials, army officers and their families, fearing a Pathet Lao take-over, fled across the Mekong over the weekend for refuge in neighboring Thailand. It is this fear that seems to be paralyzing Laos and its Government.

Part of the fear results from the events of the last week—the assassination of Boun Oum, brother of Prince Boun Oum and a leading rightist, the demonstration in front of the American Embassy and some small-scale military actions north of Vientiane.

But a greater element in the fear has been the Communist successes elsewhere in Indochina

take-overs in South Vietnam and Cambodia. As a result of those take-overs, many people here particularly Vietnamese and Chinese businessmen and right-wing Government officials, see an immediate threat to their way of life.

Quick Change Unlikely

In spite of these fears, there has been no evidence that anything like the events elsewhere in Indochina are going to happen in Laos.

Interviews with Western diplomats and Government officials disclose that the major powers here — the United States, the Soviet Union, China and North Vietnam — who urged the establishment of the coalition, continue to support it.

The North Vietnamese presence in Laos has fallen sharply over the last two years, particularly since the start of the offensive in South Vietnam.

One Western military attache who has monitored Indochina for nearly two decades, said that two years ago there were more than 80,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos, particularly in the Northeast. As of two months ago, he said, that figure had dropped to about 26,000.

"When the offensive began in Vietnam, that figure halved again," the attache continued. "There are no more 12,000 now in Laos and these are either engineering-support and advisory troops or guarding the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

Boost for Pathet Lao

Other political observers here agree that North Vietnam is unlikely to encourage a Pathet Lao take-over, but they do note that the events elsewhere in Indochina have given a psychological boost to the Pathet Lao and severely demoralized the right-wing side of the coalition.

Over the last few days, unit

after unit of Vientiane Government troops, including a contingent of cadets from the military academy, have declared their loyalty—not to the right-wing military leadership but to the Premier, a neutralist.

Scores of shopkeepers have fled the country, as have Government workers, despite a curb on exit visas. A new Government order required the opening of all businesses, warning that all that remained closed would never be allowed to reopen.

Division of Posts

The ministers who resigned over the weekend have left the country. The former Defense Minister, Sisoul na Champassak, is in Bangkok. His successor, at least for now, is his Pathet Lao deputy, Gen. Khamouance Boupa. But the latter said that in order to preserve the coalition he would most likely be replaced by a member the Vientiane government side, possibly at the Cabinet meeting.

The coalition arrangement provides that Government ministries be divided equally between members of the Pathet Lao and members of the right-wing, or Vientiane Government side. In the middle is the neutralist premier, the aging Prince Souvanna Phouma, who many believe is solely responsible for holding the coalition together.

Feelings of tenuousness and drift have brought an air of edginess to this normally sleepy city of 200,000 people on the Mekong.