

U.S. Aide Says Laotians Retake Key Town After a Week's Fight

Heavy Casualties Reported on Both Sides in Seesaw Battle for Saravane

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Nov. 22

—An American spokesman reported today that Laotian Government forces had taken the town of Saravane in southern Laos from North Vietnamese troops after a week of fighting. Heavy casualties were reported on both sides.

Government troops have been fighting a seesaw campaign for the deserted and wrecked town during the last month.

One month ago they occupied Saravane for the first time since Communist forces seized it one year ago. But on Nov. 14 two battalions of North Vietnamese—up to 1,000 men—counterattacked and drove the Vientiane troops out again.

Air Attacks Frequent

During most of the intervening time, Saravane has been subjected to air attacks. An American spokesman said Laotian Government T-28's (which are often flown by American pilots) had hit the town, and he confirmed that it had also been bombed by American planes.

He declined to disclose any details of the air attack, however.

No American military or civilian spokesman in South Vietnam, Laos or Thailand ever discloses any details about American raids on Laos, although raids over both North Vietnam and South Vietnam are usually listed in some detail each day.

In any case, air attacks on Saravane were apparently heavy this time, since Government troops reported finding "many bodies."

'Irregulars' Involved

The city was taken by Government "irregulars," the American spokesman said, but he declined to state whether these "irregulars" were from the estimated 12,000 Thai troops fighting here under the sponsorship of the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

In its meeting with the Government delegation in Vientiane this week, the Communist-led Pathet Lao reiterated a demand that the Vientiane authorities insist on a cessation of American military activity in Laos as a requisite for any negotiating progress.

So far as is known, the Government of the Laotian Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, has made no such request of the Americans.

Clashes Near Saravane

In other action reported today, 10 clashes were reported near Saravane, and the Government forces that recently recaptured the southern town of Dong Hene were reported moving eastward toward the Ho Chi Minh trail network.

Near Thakhek, an important Mekong River town opposite the American air base at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand, Government troops briefly retook a position Monday that had been captured by the Communists, but in a North Vietnamese counterattack, the position reportedly fell two hours later.

Fighting continued in most other parts of Laos, with the Communists making some gains near Long Tieng, the main logistics base supporting Government commando attacks on the Plaine des Jarres, and near the so-called Golden Triangle, where the Laotian, Thai and Burmese borders meet. The region is known for its opium production.

U.S. Pledge Reported

VIENTIANE, Nov. 22 (UPI)—Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Laotian Premier, said today that he had a commitment from the United States to continue bombing in Laos if an expected Vietnam war settlement did not include a cease-fire in his country.

He said the bombing would continue "as long as the North Vietnamese are here." The Prince also said in an interview that there was "no hope" for peace in Laos before settlement of the wider war. "As long as the North Vietnamese are here we cannot afford to stop the bombing," he said. "If there is no cease-fire in Laos, it means we will continue the fighting, and the bombing will continue."

The Premier has made guarantees of a complete withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops a condition for a cease-fire in Laos. It is also a condition for the withdrawal of Thai troops fighting for the Government.

"We have no hope for peace as long as the Vietnam question is unsettled because the Pathet Lao is following North Vietnam in this matter," he said. "Their proposed peace program is exactly like the North Vietnamese program."