

# Laotian Troops Drive

## *Fighting Bitter as Ever As the Foes Negotiate*

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Oct. 26—The war in Laos is apparently being fought as bitterly as ever as negotiations to end it continue.

According to reports reaching military sources here, fighting is especially intense in the Plaine des Jarres in northern Laos and in and around the towns at the southern tip of the country.

It is assumed here that in the event of a cease-fire the lines between Pathet Lao and Government positions will be defined by their relative positions at the time. This is considered a prime reason for the current strong Government effort to retake the southern town of Saravane from North Vietnamese defenders.

### Foe Strong There Since 1970

Saravane and another southern town, Attopeu, have been under Communist occupation more or less continuously since May, 1970, though they are technically within the zone of Government control.

Government forces clearly would like to control at least Saravane when a cease-fire takes effect and, to that end, several battalions of Government troops began an assault on the town last Saturday.

At first, rapid progress was reported in the devastated and deserted town, but today, Government troops were reported bogged down in their efforts to dislodge the strongly entrenched North Vietnamese 39th Regiment, fighting from street bunkers.

Casualties on both sides were said to be heavy.

North Vietnamese resistance was also said to be stiffening on the Plaine des Jarres, where Government forces began a campaign this week to drive out Communist troops.

### Tanks Reported Sighted

Today, North Vietnamese tanks were reported to have been sighted on the Plaine des Jarres, possibly signaling a new Communist drive there against the forces of Lieut. Gen. Vang Pao.

General Van Pao, a leader of the Meo tribes that inhabit northeastern Laos adjoining North Vietnam, commands a

force of several thousand men including "volunteer" troops from Thailand fighting in Laos under arrangements made by the United States.

Facing the general's force, which is being supplied entirely by air because access to the plain by road is cut off, are the North Vietnamese 174th Regiment and possibly other strong units. Heavy bombardments by long-range North Vietnamese artillery, possibly including 130-mm. guns, were reported there today.

The American air war over Laos, mounted mostly from bases in Thailand or from Seventh Fleet carriers, has never been reported in detail. American military spokesmen report merely that American aircraft are supporting Government efforts here.

But in the clear blue skies now prevailing over Laos, the frequent appearance of brilliant white vapor trails, strung out in groups of three, indicate the paths of B-52's, so high that they would otherwise be invisible from the ground.

### Talks Are Inconclusive

At the present level of fighting, about 10 Government soldiers are being killed in Laos every day. While such casualties are small compared with those in neighboring Vietnam, officials here say that the casualties are significant in view of the small population of Laos—less than half that of New York City.

Fairly heavy fighting was also reported today a few miles northeast of the royal Laotian capital of Luang Prabang.

So far, peace talks here, held for a few hours every Tuesday, have produced little more than a general agreement that both sides want peace.

In specific terms, the Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, has called for a new Geneva conference on Laos to constitute new international guarantees and achieve a new formula for national government.

The Pathet Lao insist that as a precondition to agreement, the American presence be removed from Laos, presumably including air support for Government forces.