

Few in Laos Foresee End of War There As Negotiations Go On in a Ritual Fashion

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Jan. 1— This is a season of weddings and parties, and the better Chinese restaurants have been full of celebrators nearly every night.

But the superficial good cheer appears to be wholly seasonal and not based on any belief by Laotians or foreigners living here that the war that has ravaged this kingdom is about to end.

"If any of the diplomats negotiating for peace really think the war is about over, it is merely a sign that they don't understand the realities of Indochina," a Laotian civil servant asserted sourly.

Talks Go On Unnoticed

With world attention centered in recent weeks on the renewed bombing of North Vietnam and the peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam in Paris, negotiations that began here two months ago between the Vietnam Government and the Communist-led Pathet Lao have gone largely unnoticed.

Most of Vientiane's quarter-million residents are probably aware that talks are being held here but if they are interested at all, they have not demonstrated the fact.

Each Tuesday morning, when the two delegations meet in a conference room on the third floor of Vientiane's Education Ministry, events proceed according to a fixed and monotonous ritual.

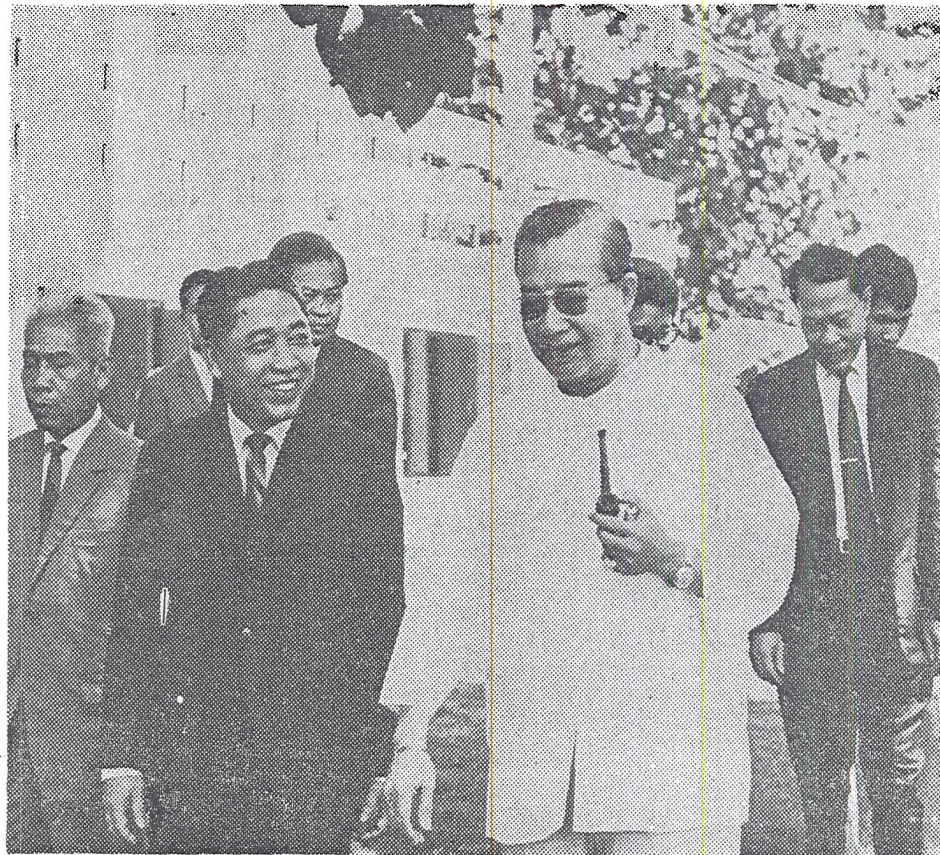
The Pathet Lao leaders always arrive for the talks five minutes early and the Government side is always 20 minutes late.

Flag Always an Issue

The technically private meetings always begin with a Pathet Lao protest about the presence of a national flag in the conference room and a demand that the Vientiane delegation omit the word "government" from the title by which it describes itself.

The meetings always last two hours, give or take a few minutes, and afterward both sides always distribute mimeographed statements prepared in advance.

Security is jointly provided by Government policemen and unarmed Pathet Lao troops. During the first few meetings, these guards were alert for possible incidents. But the Laotian public showed not the slightest sign of interest in the ministry building or the small fleet of beflagged Mercedes cars parked outside.



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Pathet Lao delegates to the Vientiane talks pay a courtesy visit to Prince Souvanna Phouma, with glasses. The Communist officials are Maha Kou Souvannamethy, left, and Phoune Sipraseuth, second from left; at right is Sot Petrasy.

The Pathet Lao troops and Government police have become so friendly during the talks that they are often seen in animated conversation, with their arms around each other or holding hands, as Indochinese men on friendly terms often do.

Newsmen Become Friendly

Newsmen and foreign diplomats waiting outside the meeting room have also become friendly.

A North Vietnamese journalist recently presented a Western colleague with a rare plant from Hanoi, whose single white flower blossoms only once a year, and only for one day. After carefully photographing the flower, the Westerner commented, "Let's hope peace doesn't turn out to be as ephemeral and fragile."

Because of the small size of Vientiane, diplomats and agents of warring sides are often inadvertently at closer quarters than would be the case in other cities, and the atmosphere is sometimes suggestive of such neutral capitals as Lisbon and Geneva during World War II.

There is no formal social con-

tact between the North Vietnamese and American embassies here, but each embassy knows the names, duties and personal background of most of the staff working for the opposing mission.

Aides Respect Each Other

The Hanoi intelligence chief here and an American counterpart have expressed professional respect for each other and the desire to meet for a talk some day, if and when such meeting is permitted by changed national policies.

Meanwhile, each works hard to make life as difficult for the other as possible, within the bounds of diplomatic propriety.

The Americans and Communists frequently get a close look at each other, especially when American helicopters or fighters are landing or taking off next to Communist transport planes.

Every Saturday, a Soviet Aeroflot airliner flies from here to Hanoi and back, providing one of the few existing air links between North Vietnam and the rest of the world. The flight nearly always carries Communist diplomats of many nationalities, a handful of Americans

opposing the war, and North Vietnamese on their way to or from vacations in the Soviet Union.

Hope for P.O.W. Return

Usually there are celebrities aboard, and sometimes there is the faint hope that some American prisoners of war may be aboard the return flight.

The groups of people who go to the airport to meet the Russian flights are studded with agents assigned to observe each other. One American agent in particular, whose task appears to be to gather movie footage of all Pathet Lao and other important Communist officials, has become so familiar at the peace talks and airport that he even gets an occasional smile from his targets.

The war in other parts of this small landlocked kingdom continues, of course, more intensely than ever in some areas. Each day brings reports of dead and wounded from battles in and around such southern Laotian towns as Saravane, Kengkok and Thakhek, where the opposing sides are trying to chisel ground from each other's zones of control. But on the whole the war has been kind



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Peace talks are held at the Education Ministry. The door to the conference room is guarded by a Government policeman, left, and a Pathet Lao soldier.

to Vientiane, apart from rising prices and other economic hardships.

Unlike the situation in the other Indochina capitals of Saigon and Phnom Penh, there is no terrorism here, and only rarely is the distant boom of artillery audible.

The reason is that since 1962, Vientiane has been the capital of a technically neutral country. The Pathet Lao side has long since given up the role in government allotted it by the 1962 Geneva accord, but it has maintained a delegation here. China, the Soviet Union and other Communist nations also maintain embassies in Vientiane.

Thanks to huge infusions of American aid during the last decade, the streets of Vientiane are now all paved, and an impressive arch built with American cement stands at the end of Vientiane's wide, central thoroughfare, Lane Xang Boulevard.

Since September, the city has had its own narcotics detoxification center, where both Laotian and American addicts are treated.

New Aspects of a Capital

These structures, along with many new houses and a new market have given Vientiane something of the aspect of a capital city rather than the down-at-the-heels market town it was only a few years ago.

Despite the war, Vientiane seems so safe that the several thousand Americans living here are scarcely more exposed to danger than they would be at home. Furthermore, despite the talk of withdrawing the American presence from Indochina in the event of a settlement between Washington and Hanoi, the American establishment in Laos shows no sign that people are planning to leave.

At the huge United States aid mission compound, a center of American social life here, there are movies, bingo games, pizza and milk shakes, women's club meetings and Girl Scout cookie sales. Hundreds of American children in blue jeans or shorts create the impression of a suburban American shopping center.

One high American official dismissed with a shrug the possibility that all this would have to go in the event of a peace agreement. "Laos will still need

massive American help feeding its refugees, building its hospitals and schools and supporting its economy whatever happens," he said.

The North Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao ally do not see things that way. So-called American aid to Indochina is and always has been for the purpose of providing a cover for spraying, paramilitary operations, political subversion and every other kind of dirty trick," a North Vietnamese diplomat said. "And yet the Americans fail to understand that the patriotic forces will simply not tolerate them here anymore if there is to be peace. Whatever Dr. Kissinger and Mr. Le Duc Tho may have to say to each other in Paris, what I see in Laos is an American colonial presence that apparently intends to stay, come what may."

U. S. Role Called Essential

On the other hand, Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Laotian Premier, continues to insist that the American presence both here and in neighboring Thailand is both essential and guaranteed by Washington, as long as North Vietnamese troops remain on Laotian soil.

There is no sign here that Hanoi plans to remove its forces from Laos, especially the eastern strip bordering both North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Indications are that the North Vietnamese regard control of this area as vital to their own security. Consequently, in the absence of any real agreement between the opposing sides on how to bring peace to Laos, there is a general feeling here that the war will go on.

"We can only hope," a Western diplomat said, "that in the months and years ahead the war in Laos will tend to be chronic rather than acute. No war is a good war, but the one that kills fewest people is the better of two evils. That is about as much holiday cheer as I am prepared to exude."