

Laos Fighting, Talks Expected to Intensify

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VIENTIANE, Feb. 4—North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao attacks on government military positions are expected to intensify this week—along with U.S. bombing reprisals on the Communist forces.

The anticipated heavy fighting in Laos would parallel a critical phase in the secret peace talks now in progress between the Pathet Lao and the government of Premier Souvanna Phouma.

According to knowledgeable American sources, the North Vietnamese will make an all-out effort to strengthen Pathet Lao territorial holdings as a cease-fire approaches.

U.S. bombers will fly as many missions against the Communist attackers as the government of Laos requests, the sources said, "bearing in mind that the tempo of fighting is likely to pick up tremendously, and there may be demands on our aircraft throughout the country."

Some foreign observers claim that American bombing has already built up over Laos, following the cease-fire in Vietnam.

However, U.S. Embassy officials continue to say merely that bombing missions by B-52s and other U.S. aircraft are being carried out at the request of the Royal Lao government. No mention is ever made of the number, location or intensity of the missions.

Some of the heaviest North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao attacks are expected at Bouam Long, northwest of the Plain or Jars, and around the central crossroads town of Sala Phoukoun.

Until now, only indigenous Pathet Lao forces, with some North Vietnamese advisers, have gone into battle against Laotian and volunteer Thai troops at Sala Phoukoun. The town's importance is that it stands at the intersection of

Highways 7 and 13. The latter is the main route between the royal capital at Luang Prabang and the government's administrative center at Vientiane.

The town was captured by the Pathet Lao on New Year's Eve and recaptured 26 days later by government forces, aided by helicopter-borne Thai volunteers and by heavy U.S. and Lao air force bombing.

Now, according to U.S. sources, North Vietnamese units are expected to join the Pathet Lao for a major attack. Another hard fight is expected to the west at Bouam Long, which has been bombarded in the past week by North Vietnamese gunners firing 85 mm. and 120 mm. artillery.

Other areas likely to be fought over as cease-fire talks move into what could be their final stage include the town of Saravan, just north of the Bolovens Plateau, in Southernmost Laos.

The projected picture for the coming week or more is of duels for territorial advantage, similar to the landgrabbing battles in South Vietnam before the cease-fire there took hold.

Observers here are convinced that the return to Vien-

tiane last night of senior Pathet Lao leader Phoumi Vongvichit signals a now-or-never point in the negotiations which began Oct. 17.

According to one Western diplomat close to the elderly Phoumi, he is authorized to negotiate a final cease-fire settlement without making any further time-consuming air trips to Pathet Lao headquarters in the northwestern town of Sam Neua.

In a major change, the Pathet Lao is now apparently willing to work out a military cease-fire before a political settlement. This is expected to help the talks progress immeasurably.

The government side, meanwhile, has been bolstered by the brief visit yesterday of U.S. Vice President Spiro Agnew. The Vice President, according to an informed source, assured Prince Souvanna that Washington would stand by him not just in his negotiations with the Communists, but also in his efforts to stave off rightist attempts to stall the talks.

Some observers believe Souvanna will face more difficulty in dealing with the right than the left once peace is achieved.