

Laos Premier Confident Of Truce Within a Week

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Prince Souvanna Phouma, the Laotian Premier, expressed confidence in an interview today that a cease-fire would be concluded here within one week—at the latest by Feb. 15—despite the onset of a general Communist military offensive and an evident hardening of the Communist negotiating position.

The prince declined to discuss details of two private talks that he held yesterday and today with the chief Pathet Lao negotiator, Phoumi Vongvichit who arrived here Saturday from the Pathet Lao capital of Samneua. Mr. Phoumi Vongvichit, a member of the Pathet Lao central committee, said he had full power to complete the negotiations for his side.

Prince Souvanna Phouma reiterated his view that all North Vietnamese forces must be withdrawn from Laos and con-

But when the Premier was asked whether this meant that he trusted the word of the North Vietnamese, he shifted the cigar in his mouth and said: "I don't trust anybody."

Prince Souvanna Phouma said that his first two talks with the Pathet Lao leader had been cordial, and that he expected to see him again tomorrow or the day after.

Prince Would Travel

Asked whether he would be willing to go to Samneua himself for talks with the nominal head of the Pathet Lao, Prince Souphanouvong, he replied: "Certainly. I have been to Samneua before."

In reply to a question as to whether he would head a new coalition government including the Pathet Lao, Prince Souvanna Phouma said:

"The negotiations have not reached that point yet. When they do, if I am asked to head the new government, I will make my decision at that time."

It is generally assumed that

the Premier would be the only head of government potentially acceptable to both sides, although the distribution of ministries in the future government is certain to be one of the thorniest problems facing negotiators.

Prince Souvanna Phouma said he had not been aware of the apparently hardened position of displayed at this morning's regular weekly meeting between Pathet Lao and Vientiane negotiators.

Separate Talks Demanded

Many Vientiane officials were

under the impression that the Pathet Lao had tacitly dropped its insistence that negotiations toward a military cease-fire be conducted along with talks leading to settlement of the Laotian political situation. But today the Pathet Lao made it clear that it would not agree to separating the two problems, and said a cease-fire could take place only after the political problems were settled.

In any case, the military situation in Laos has become grave.

Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops were reported today to be gaining ground rapidly.

Among the main military developments reported by military sources were these:

Three more Government positions near the Burmese border north of Houei Sai were overrun by Pathet Lao troops. Yesterday, the Government reported the fall of the key supply base at nearby Nam Yeu.

Communist troops have begun a campaign to recapture the important road junction at Sala Phou Khoun, where Routes 7 and 13 cross southeast of the royal capital of Luang Prabang.

Long-range North Vietnamese artillery based at the Plaine des Jarres has resumed sporadic shelling of Long Tieng to the southwest. Long Tieng is the main base sponsored by the American Central Intelligence Agency to supply irregular forces fighting the Communists around the Plaine des Jarres.

In Southern Laos, North Vietnamese troops have pushed Government troops westward all the way to Muong Phalane. The town reportedly was hit Sunday by 100 shells and rockets as a siege began.

Communist troops apparently have begun a last-ditch drive to take the city of Thakhek on the Mekong River, opposite the vital American air base in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. The fall of Thakhek would cut the southern tongue of Laos in two, all the way from the Thai border to the Vietnamese border. Thakhek was hit by 30 heavy rockets, which reportedly killed four civilians and destroyed four houses.

Heavy fighting was reported around the town of Pak Song in southernmost Laos, with Vientiane troops under increasing pressure. Pak Song just northwest of the strategic Plateau des Bolovens is regarded as essential to Government forces if they hope to maintain even a toehold on the plateau. Yesterday, Paksong was heavily shelled and attacked by ground troops. Vientiane troops reportedly opened a counterattack and the battle is still on.

Forty miles to the northwest, the city of Khong Sedone, which changed hands three times last year, was reported under Communist pressure again. Ten large rockets reportedly fell in the town Sunday.

Over-all, the situation for Government forces throughout Laos was described by a military informant today as "bad," with the troops spread dangerously thin and facing strong opposition in many sectors.

According to today's communiqué from United States Pacific headquarters in Honolulu, American planes, including B-52's, were active over Laos again Monday.

The Pathet Lao condemned the American raids in a speech read by one of its negotiators, Tiao Souk Vongsack. He said:

"American B-52 strategic planes have intensified their bombardment of the Plain des Jarres and Xieng Khouang zones in a perfidious and barbarous manner. The combat aircraft of the U. S. Air Force flying from bases in Thailand and the Seventh Fleet have used their full power to bomb, destroy, burn and devastate Laotian territory.

"The longer the United States and its lackeys persist in prolonging this hopeless war the more they will suffer increasingly painful defeats each day."

In the interview today, Prince Souvanna Phouma's attention was called to the reports of heavy bombing by American planes in the last few days and the Honolulu communiqué, which said such bombing was being carried out at the request of the Laotian Government.

The Prince was asked whether he had requested the bombing, and he replied: "No."

He quickly added: "But the situation is as it has been, that American bombing is carried out as required by the military situation. When Communist pressure is heavy, as it is now, we ask for more air support from the United States."



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Communists captured more posts near Houei Sai (1) and began drives to take Sala Phou Khoun (2) and Thakhek (3). Battle was reported in Pak Song area (4).

ceded that despite his optimism, Hanoi had opened a "general offensive."

Reports today indicated that Pathet Lao, troops and their North Vietnamese allies were attacking throughout Laos, threatening a number of key towns and strongpoints.

However, the Prince said, the North Vietnamese "have given their promise, as described in Article 20 of the Paris agreement," to withdraw from Laos.