

Accord on Truce Still Eludes Laotians

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Feb. 13—
The Laotian Government and the Communist-led Pathet Lao remained locked in conflict both at the conference table here and on the battlefield today, although optimism was expressed by both sides that a cease-fire agreement could be reached soon.

Despite the fairly friendly attitude shown by negotiating teams at their regular weekly meeting today, both sides acknowledged that some important differences remained between them.

Last week, the Laotian Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, predicted that a cease-fire would take effect by Thursday at the latest, and some members of his Government had indicated even more optimism.

But today considerable doubt was cast by both sides that a cease-fire accord could be reached this week. As a precautionary measure, the opposing delegations agreed to plan for another weekly meeting next Tuesday.

Among the major unresolved problems were the present and future roles in Laos of the United States and North Vietnam.

End of Bombing Asked

The Pathet Lao side continues to argue that a climate of peace can be created only by the cessation of American bombing in Laos. The Communists are also insisting that the United States be a party to a future Laotian agreement.

The Vientiane Government argues that the American bombing is purely in response to North Vietnamese attacks in Laos and that it is directed solely against the North Vietnamese, not the Pathet Lao. The Government also insists that if the United States were to be made party to an agreement, North Vietnam would also have to sign the accord.

Reliable sources disclosed that the American Ambassador, G. McMurtrie Godley, flew to the royal capital, Luang Prabang, yesterday, presumably to confer with King Savang Vatthana.

An American spokesman declined to reveal any information, but it seemed probable that a major reason for the trip was the question of American participation in a cease-fire agreement. It is believed here that the United States would not agree to be a party to such an agreement under any circumstances.

Late today, the acting Laotian Defense Minister, Sisouk na Champassak, called a news conference to "dispel the confusion" that has resulted from many conflicting rumors as to the course of the talks here.

First, he said, the military situation for his forces has improved considerably since last week when Communist troops were advancing nearly everywhere.

He said a news blackout had been imposed on military information in Laos to curb alarm

spreading in areas hard-pressed by the Communists.

Mr. Sisouk na Champassak said that the key town of Pak Song bordering the Plateau de Bolovens in southern Laos, which had been captured by the Communist forces last week, was retaken yesterday, that the front in the Saravane area had been stabilized, that the Mekong River town of Thakhek was out of danger and that large quantities of Communist arms had been captured.

"We want a cease-fire as soon as possible," he said. "It is tragic that the killing goes on even now," he added, noting that more than 15 days had already passed since the cease-fire in Vietnam went into effect.

Premier Souvanna Phouma had earlier predicted that a cease-fire in Laos would take place 15 days after the vietnam cease-fire.

Mr. Sisouk na Champassak said that a major obstacle in the continuing talks was that the Pathet Lao still insisted on linking a political settlement with a military truce. Another problem, he said, was the continued Pathet Lao insistence that American intervention in Laos was the main obstacle to peace.

More Hanoi Troops Reported

The defense chief said that two more North Vietnamese regiments had recently moved into battle in southern Laos

from the Communist supply route known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, to bring total North Vietnamese strength in southern Laos to nine regiments. He said that approximately 57,000 North Vietnamese troops were now in Laos with 28,000 of them stationed along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Mr. Sisouk na Champassak said that American bombing was being conducted exclusively against North Vietnamese strongholds, mainly in Military Regions III and IV, that is, the southern tongue of Laos. Asked about Pathet Lao complaints that American bombing was also being conducted on the Plaine des Jarres, in Xieng Khouang Province and other northern areas, he said such raids were "only light."

Mr. Sisouk na Champassak said repeatedly that a North Vietnamese withdrawal from Laos depended on the agreement reached last month between the Americans and Hanoi. However, he added:

"We hope the North Vietnamese will leave, but we are afraid they will leave at least some units behind, because the Pathet Lao can do little without them."

"We have intelligence that the North Vietnamese plan to leave behind one or two battalions in each of our five military regions, probably hiding in the jungles," he said.