

U.S. Queries Laos Reds About Captives

It Acts After Cease-Fire Is Signed, Putting End to 20 Years of War

NYTimes
Special to The New York Times
VIENTIANE, Laos, Thursday, Feb. 22 — With the agreement signed to end the war in Laos, United States officials quickly made contact with the Communist Pathet Lao yesterday, apparently to find out whom it is holding as prisoners of war. The accord ending the 20-year conflict, completed here

Text of agreement ending hostilities in Laos, Page 17.

earlier in the day by Pheng Phongsavan, chief negotiator for the Vientiane Government, and Phoumi Vongvichit, a Pathet Lao leader, establishes an interim coalition government to consist of equal numbers from both sides and provides for a cease-fire effective at noon today (midnight Wednesday, New York time). Prisoners are to be exchanged within 60 days.

[In Washington, Secretary of State William P. Rogers said American bombing of Laos would stop when the cease-fire took effect. Page 17.]

Prisoners as a Lever

There are several hundred Americans missing in Laos, but it has never been determined how many are dead and how many held captive.

The Pathet Lao has said that it holds Americans who will be repatriated in Laos, not North Vietnam, and who were not covered by the Paris agreements between Hanoi and Washington.

It seems probable that the Pathet Lao intends to use the prisoner issue to help insure American support for the cease-fire, including a cessation of

Continued on Page 16, Column 5

Continued From Page 1, Col. 3

the bombing and the withdrawal of American Central Intelligence Agency agents and of Thai mercenaries paid by the United States.

No American officials in Vientiane were willing to talk with newsmen about the prisoners. But Mr. Phoumi Vongvichit,

who is Secretary General of the Neo Lao Hak Xat, or Laotian Patriotic Front, alluded to the situation at a news conference after he had signed the agreement.

Just before the news conference, two key members of the United States Embassy staff, John G. Dean, deputy chief of mission, and S. Richard Rand, the consul, whose duties include obtaining information on American prisoners of the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao, emerged from the Pathet Lao headquarters.

Meeting With Ambassador

At the news conference Mr. Phoumi Vongvichit was asked if he had contact with the Americans after the signing ceremony. He said the Ambassador, G. McMurtrie Godley, "congratulated us on the accord and said the United States would do all it could to help realize the terms of the accord, and that was all."

The United States is not a party to the Laotian agreement, as it is to the Vietnam agreement. The settlement in Vietnam included a segment calling for respect for the Geneva agreements on Laos and Cambodia and for settlement of their problems without foreign interference. Henry A. Kissinger, who negotiated the Vietnam agreement in behalf of President Nixon, said after its completion that there was reason to believe that the way was open to settlements in Laos and Cambodia.

Since Ambassador Godley was not present at the signing of the Laotian accord, it seemed likely that he had called at the Pathet Lao headquarters.

When Mr. Phoumi Vongvichit, who did not mention the visit by Mr. Dean and Mr. Rand, was asked about prisoners of war, he replied: "Do not call them prisoners of war. I call them people who were captured and held during the war. Their number, national-

ities and identities you will learn when they are released."

When the agreement was signed a few bottles of champagne were opened at the residence of the Laotian Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, but much of the rest of Vientiane seemed shrouded in gloom.

Little Interest Aroused

The signing ceremony, also held at Prince Souvanna Phouma's combination office and residence on the Mekong River, attracted little interest.

It seemed at times that the Pathet Lao had assumed the function of informing the public of events. The Information Ministry appeared to have given up, and until late yesterday no Government agency or official was able to provide a French translation of the agreement. The Pathet Lao, however, was ready with copies in Laotian and French almost immediately.

It promptly called the news conference, during which Mr. Phoumi Vongvichit reiterated his faction's happiness at reaching agreement to end the war.

He said he would remain in Vientiane for the time being, at the disposition of the nominal Pathet Lao leader, Prince Souphanouvong. He added that he understood that Prince Souphanouvong wanted to come here but he did not know when.

Prince Souphanouvong whose de facto capital is Samneua, has many friends and relatives here, among them his half-brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma.

Outranks the Prince

Although Mr. Phoumi Vongvichit is technically the "plenipotentiary representative" of Prince Souphanouvong, as Secretary General of the Pathet Lao's controlling party he actually outranks the Prince.

Asked whether the Laotian flag would remain when the coalition government is created or whether a new one would be adopted, Mr. Phoumi Vongvichit said the matter was under discussion and would be decided by the mixed political commission.

He declined to speculate when a general election would take place, as stipulated in the agreement. He said the mixed commissions would begin meeting soon but had not yet set time or place.

To a question whether the problem of cease-fire violations would be as serious in Laos as in Vietnam, the Pathet Lao leader replied: "It is difficult to reply. We cannot tell now. But by the way, there have been no violations in Vietnam

—only violations against Vietnam."

Despite the formal satisfaction expressed by the parties, there were growing fears that

the Laotian right wing, including many troops commanders, might be angry enough to attempt to sabotage the accord. The Acting Defense Minister in Prince Souvanna Phouma's Cabinet, Sisouk na Champassak, was described by a close friend as being in "a towering rage" over the agreement, which is widely regarded as close to general capitulation to the Pathet Lao.

Prince Souvanna Phouma was restrained and sober in his remarks to diplomats and newsmen and gave the impression that he continued to hope for the best despite a dubious beginning. Asked about mounting opposition to the accord in the right wing and in his own neutralist faction, he said: "You cannot expect everyone and his father to like it."

The International Control Commission set up under the 1962 agreement on the neutralization of Laos and made up of India, Canada and Poland will continue to oversee compliance with the cease-fire until the mixed military commission established by the new agreement has worked out a new supervisory system. The new commission will be responsible for maintaining the cease-fire and supervising the withdrawal of foreign troops and the prisoner exchange. The old commission will retain authority to oversee the cease-fire.

There are no protocols on the number of international observers, where they will be posted, or what access they will have to key positions in the two zones. They have not been permitted in the Communist zone heretofore.



Associated Press

Agreement on a cease-fire in Laos is signed in Vientiane by Pheng Phongsavan, left, the Government's representative, and Phoumi Vongvichit, a leader of the Pathet Lao.