

Only One Side Rejoices

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The Lion's Share of the Bargain in Laos Seems to Have Gone to the Communists

NYTimes By MALCOLM W. BROWNE
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VIENTIANE, Laos, Thursday, Feb. 22—While the peace accord signed in Laos yesterday bears a strong family resemblance to the accord signed on Vietnam last month, the Communist side here seems to have won the lion's share of the bargain.

The agreement reflects the enormous military and political pressure the Communists were able to exert here at the last moment.

In effect, the accord leaves the Communist-led Pathet Lao controlling most of the territory of Laos for the time being, with the remaining part to be administered on a 50-50 basis by the Pathet Lao and the Government.

Until yesterday power was theoretically shared three ways by the Pathet Lao, the rightists and the neutralists.

Furthermore, while the accord specifically names the United States and Thailand as foreign forces in Laos, the North Vietnamese, whose forces are much more numerous here, are not named. The Vietnam cease-fire agreement calls for "foreign countries," which it does not name, to withdraw military forces from Cambodia and Laos.

Given the disarray in which the neutralists and rightists making up the Vientiane Government now find themselves, the discipline and unity of the Communist side is certain to provide an enormous advantage.

Even on a number of relatively minor points, the Government demonstrated yesterday that it had finally yielded to Pathet Lao pressure.

Among these is a provision on the withdrawal of foreign forces.

The Government had argued that 30 days or at the most 45 days after the cease-fire will be ample time to withdraw all foreign forces. The Pathet Lao insisted on 90 days, according to the joint document signed yesterday, foreign troops will be obliged to leave Laos 60 days after the date that a new provisional government made up of both sides comes into being.

This government is to be formed within 30 days from yesterday. So, in effect, the Pathet Lao demand for a 90-day period prevailed.

Given the volatility of Laotian politics, three months is a long time, in which North Vietnamese troops can continue to bring heavy pressure to bear, particularly when American air raids are halted.

Even presuming that the cease-fire is relatively effective, the Laotian Army has never been known for its discipline or unity, and now, with the war over in theory, many Vientiane units are likely to disband themselves for lack of unifying direction.

The most effective elements fighting for Vientiane in any case are irregular troops, many of them tribesmen, who are often paid and commanded directly by American Central Intelligence Agency men. Irregular units tend to disperse rapidly unless held together by firm command, high pay and a feeling that they will continue to be supported by Americans if necessary.

Some See 'Sellout'

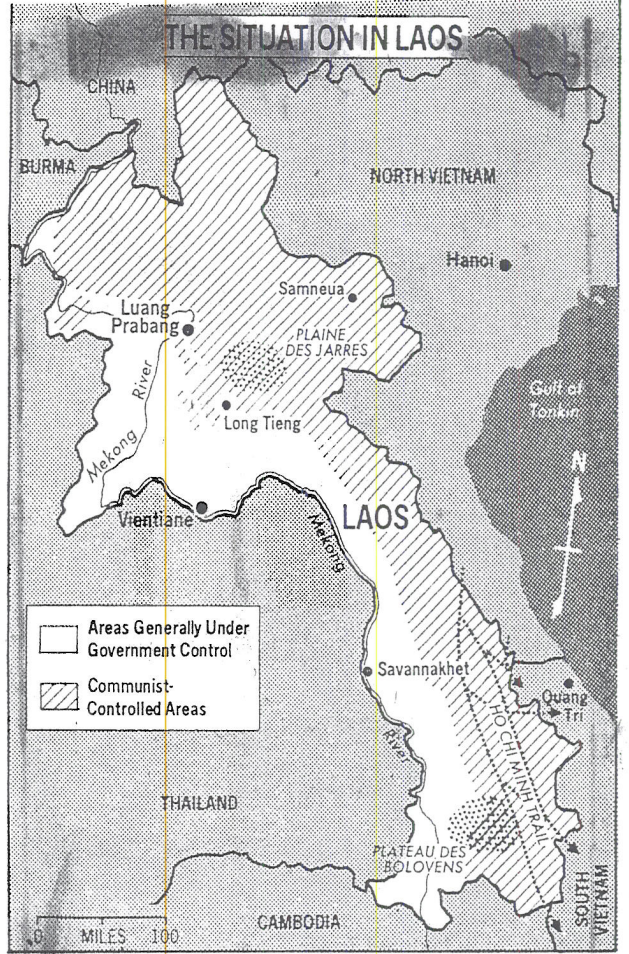
Right-wing politicians and conservative neutralists here are almost unanimous, at least in private, in their harsh denunciation of yesterday's accord. Many openly charge "an American sellout."

The United States will maintain its powerful air bases in neighboring Thailand, but American air support, the politicians believe would be resumed only in case of some obvious catastrophe.

To avoid this, the Communist side, the politicians contend, will chip away subtly but nonetheless effectively at the skimpy military and political fence remaining between them and ultimate complete control of Laos.

As a matter of fact, the United States still has a national stake in Laos, apart from the general pledge Washington has made to help rebuild the war-torn nations of Indochina.

The Pathet Lao hold a number of American prisoners who, they say, will not be returned by Hanoi but will be returned by the Pathet Lao in Laos itself.



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Map shows approximate areas held by opposing forces

The number of these prisoners is not known, but several hundred Americans have been placed on the missing list in Laos over the years.

Yesterday's accord specifies that prisoner exchanges in Laos—presumably including the Americans and those of other non-Laotian nationalities—will be completed within 60 days of the creation of a new provisional government, hence, within 90 days from yesterday.

These prisoners could become another lever in Pathet Lao hands for pressure on the Americans, although there have been no direct formal contacts between the Pathet Lao and the Americans.

One particularly weak aspect of yesterday's accord, differing from the agreement on Vietnam, is that no protocols were attached covering specific problems, such as prisoner exchange or the future role of the three-nation International Control Commission.

The accord merely says that the commission—made up of India, Canada and Poland, with the Indian delegate as chairman—will function according to the rules laid down by the 1962 Geneva agreement on Laos.

That agreement proved unenforceable and broke down almost immediately.

Indians, Canadians and Poles stationed here with the Control Commission are extremely pessimistic that the current agreement will work any better, unless all sides show a great deal

more good faith than seems likely at present.

There remains a great deal of uncertainty whether Canada will be willing to continue her participation in the commission.

Despite the implied denunciation of the United States in the accord document, there is agreement in the accord that United States aid to all of Laos, including the Pathet Lao, will be welcome.

This aid, the accord says, will be worked out in discussions between the provision Vientiane government and the United States.

The American aid mission here seems likely to expand provided Congress sustains the White House pledge to continue aid to Indochina.

But the Pathet Lao can be expected to watch American activities closely, particularly those that might have military or paramilitary applications.

This notably includes Air America, the paramilitary airline operated mainly for the C.I.A., which supplies irregular Vientiane forces and provides a more or less military airlift for the Vientiane Government.

The control commission is expected to contract for the use of Air America aircraft for its own duties in the near future.

Vientiane clearly gained one important point in negotiations with the Pathet Lao. This concerns creation of a "political consultative council."

This joint council is to be

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made up of equal numbers of representatives from the Pathet Lao and Vientiane Government plus "a certain number of personalities favoring peace, independence, neutrality and democracy."

The Pathet Lao may well end up with a majority vote on the committee, which will be re-

sponsible for working out political details of the formation of a new provisional government and later of calling general elections for a new National Assembly.

But the decisions of the council must be unanimous, a fact leaving the Vientiane Government considerable room for maneuver.

The accord stipulates that after the council reaches a unanimous decision on any issue it must then submit that decision to the provisional government, which in turn will submit it to the king for promulgation.

The agreement does not say that the provisional government

has veto power over an agreement by the council, but at least the provisional government is placed higher in the chain of command.

Hopes were expressed by all parties that for once goodwill and peace would prevail in Laos.

But in more personal terms, the Pathet Lao was rejoicing and nearly all Government officials were bitterly lamenting the agreement.