

Cease-Fire in Laos

The peace agreement between the Laotian Government and the Communist-led Pathet Lao offers hope that an end to the bloodletting in all of Indochina may at last be really in sight. The speedy call for a cease-fire along with the termination of American bombing—both presumably in effect as of now—is an encouraging indication that all sides to the agreement seem anxious to put an end to the killing.

After twenty years of almost constant warfare, in which foreign adversaries kept up a steady flow of weapons into a country desperately in need of peaceful development, the vision of peace is the paramount immediate concern. It is infinitely more important than any assessment of the relative gains and losses registered by the major factions—the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies, the neutralists represented by Prince Souvanna Phouma, and the rightists with their American support.

These factions will be maneuvering to gain the upper hand in a "government of national union" to be established within thirty days. Although Secretary of State Rogers and spokesmen in Hanoi yesterday hailed the truce in almost identical terms as an important step toward the achievement of peace in all of Indochina, both the Pathet Lao and North Vietnam were quick to proclaim the settlement as a victory for their side. The fact that the rightists clearly could not hope to continue the battle without American bombers, which the American negotiators apparently threatened to withdraw, gives considerable substance to that claim. The Communists, who are estimated to control two-thirds of Laotian territory (although only one-third of the population) are clearly in a strong position in the post-armistice jockeying for power.

In the weeks ahead therefore much depends on Hanoi's goodwill, which Henry Kissinger's team undoubtedly tried to elicit as part of the larger search for peace. Although the agreement calls for withdrawal of all foreign troops, with explicit mention of American forces on land and in the skies, it does not mention Hanoi's troops, estimated at 60,000, whose presence has never been admitted by the Communists. Clearly, the best that can realistically be expected is that the neutralists will be strong enough, and both Hanoi and the United States sufficiently conciliatory and responsible, to prevent rightist and Pathet Lao hawks from re-opening the fratricidal war.

For the United States the most important task now is to press for an effective cease-fire in the third of the embattled Indochina lands—Cambodia. The first step in that direction is to halt the American air strikes against that country whose precarious neutralist independence fell victim to the ill-conceived American invasion two years ago. As soon as all the remaining prisoners of war have come home, the last vestige of an excuse for American military involvement in Indochina will have been removed. This nation's efforts to aid reconstruction and reconciliation will then be able to enhance American prestige far more persuasively than all the past years of firepower.