

Pathet Lao Gains Major Goals in Pact

U.S. Pressure Seen a Factor

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VIENTIANE, Feb. 21 — The Laotian cease-fire agreement signed here today represents a victory for the Communist Pathet Lao in realizing its key political objectives.

Under the combined force of North Vietnamese military attacks and U.S. diplomatic pressure during the past three weeks, the government of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma has given in to virtually every Pathet Lao demand.

As a result, the rightist elements in Souvanna's government have all but been demolished. And although Souvanna is generally conceded by all parties as the most logical choice to head a new coalition government, his future role could be in doubt.

The accord, divided into military and political section, is most entirely the work of the Pathet Lao, with minor concessions to the government side.

Under the military provisions, all foreign troops in Laos must be withdrawn within 90 days from the time the cease-fire goes into effect — at midnight EST tonight.

[On the eve of the Laotian cease-fire, the U.S. Pacific military headquarters at Honolulu said today that U.S. plans, including B-52 bombers, continued their raids over Laos at the request of the government, UPI reported.]

This has been a basic Communist demand since negotiations between the two sides began on Oct. 17. Souvanna had been striving for a 30-day schedule.

The 90-day grace period could prove most useful to

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North Vietnam, which has some 65,000 troops in Laos. Informed observers believe Hanoi will use the three months, if necessary, to move personnel and supplies along the Laotian portion of the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam and Cambodia.

Furthermore, nowhere in the agreement—according to an unofficial Pathet Lao translation from the original Lao into French—is mention made of North Vietnam.

Conversely, the United States and Thailand are specifically called upon to respect the "peace, independence and neutrality" of Laos. The United States, in addition to bombing Laotian territory with Thailand-based aircraft, has supported an estimated 30,000 man force of "volunteers" from the Thai army fighting in Laos.

By studiously not mentioning North Vietnam, the agreement perpetuates Hanoi's insistence that its forces are not and never have intruded into Laotian territory.

Souvanna's concessions to the Pathet Lao on the North Vietnamese question is a blow to the government rightists. Led by Finance Minister Champassak Sisouk, the rightists struggled without success to hold off an agreement which did not include a clause demanding North Vietnamese withdrawal.

Sisouk insists that the North Vietnamese will not pull all of their forces out of Laos and that, in time, they will again attempt to seize control of the country.

The cease-fire in place will, in principle, revert to the 1962 Geneva agreement on Laos establishing separate zones of control under the Pathet Lao and government sides.

At present, the Pathet Lao are believed to be in control of two-thirds of Laotian territory but less than one-third of the population of some 3 million.

The 1962 agreement, in fact, is the basis for most of the new settlement. The two Laotian sides have committed themselves to executing the basic cease-fire terms while turning over supervision of the peace to the International Control Commission (ICC).

The ICC is to be composed of the same three members nations which were chosen in the earlier accord: Canada, Poland and India. The size and scope of the commission are not specified in either the old or the new agreement. These matters are to be discussed by the two sides later this week.

ICC Reactivated

The government side has striven for an ICC of at least 500 observers, while the Pathet Lao want a much smaller force. According to informed observers, the reactivated ICC will be no larger than it was in 1962, about 300 strong.

On the political side, the

new provisional government, which is to be set up within 30 days of the cease-fire will be a 50-50 affair.

While the exact number of seats from each side has not yet been determined, the provisional body will be augmented by "two personalities who are for peace, independence and neutrality." This unusual wording means that each side will choose one so-called neutralist of predetermined inclination.

At the same time the provisional government is established, a political consultative council will come into force. This body will be of the same ideological composition and proportions as the provisional government.

The council, another Pathet Lao pet project, is expected to oversee the administration of the political and military provisions of the accord. It is also supposed to organize national elections.

No date for the elections has been set under the agreement. However, the national constitution stipulates that the present National Assembly may not be dissolved until May.

Another clause of the accord says that the cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabang will be "neutralized." Asked to explain what this meant, Pathet Lao chief negotiator Phoumi Vongvichit said only that "neutralize means exactly what it says."

This presumably means that the Pathet Lao will be guaranteed complete safety and protection in the two cities. Vientiane is presently the government's administrative center and Luang Prabang is the royal capital. Both are in government-controlled areas. The Pathet Lao have their administrative center in the northwestern town of Sam Neua.

The agreement states that

once the cease-fire goes into effect, persons living in Pathet Lao and government-controlled areas will be free to move into each others areas. This is intended to help the hundreds of thousands of displaced Laotians return to their home villages.

The matter of supplying government and Pathet Lao military forces by way of routes through each others territory, however, has yet to be decided.

POW Returns

Prisoners of war held by the two sides are to be returned "no later than" 90 days from the start of the cease-fire. The United States lists about 300 Americans as missing in Laos, although large numbers of these are assumed to have been killed when their planes were shot down. The Pathet Lao recently released a list of just seven U.S. military personnel, two American civilians and one Canadian as being held in Laos.

The accord was signed today in a five-minute ceremony at Souvanna's home. Phoumi signed for the Pathet Lao and Interior Minister Pheng Pongsavan signed for the government side. The signing was witnessed by about a dozen invited foreign diplomats including the ambassadors of the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Britain.

Later in the day, the Pathet Lao held a press conference at a shed attached to the Pathet Lao headquarters here.

Reading from a prepared text, Phoumi said that the cease-fire would be "total and simultaneous" and would include "the cessation of bombing and shooting on the part of the U.S. Air Force."