

# In War or Peace, Vientiane Goes Own Way

NYTimes

MAR 3 1973

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Special to The New York Times

VIENTIANE, Laos, March 2 —The Laotian cease-fire, which went into effect Feb. 22 and was received in capitals around the world as a major development, has not had the slightest visible effect on Vientiane, which was and is by far the most peaceful capital in Indochina. Through decades of war Vientiane has remained an oasis in a desert of destruction and totalitarian rule. Here lambs and lions of all political stripes have continued to drink together in peace despite the war ravaging the countryside.

The clumps of barbed wire, military barricades, trenches and other eyesores that have proliferated like weeds in Saigon, Phnom Penh and Hanoi have never erupted in Vientiane, nor have belligerent posters or mass displays of flags defaced it.

Because it has long been a truly neutral town, the sight of a Pathet Lao soldier in shabby green uniform wandering through the produce market excites no more curiosity now than it did before the cease-fire. The soldier has probably lived here for years and spends more time hoeing the vegetable patch in the Pathet Lao compound next to the market than in checking his rifle for rust.

When the cease-fire was signed on the 21st there were no bells, no parades, no stern warnings to the population

and no collective trauma. Laos is the only country in Indochina where most of the people do what they want most of the time.

There were those who said the cease-fire might make it easier to bring produce in from the countryside. There were a few—most of them wealthy politicians or military men—who denounced the accord as outright surrender to the Communists.

But the Laotian Communists have been around too long and in too benign a guise for most people to worry much. Even the arrival of such Pathet Lao luminaries as Phoumi Vongvichit, who signed the peace agreement for his side, caused no stir.

Mr. Phoumi Vongvichit and most of his colleagues are well known here from the early nineteen-sixties, when the previous coalition Government was functioning. Technically he is still Information Minister of that Government, despite the Pathet Lao's withdrawal nine years ago.

Laotians are much more suspicious of the Vietnamese than of Communists as such, not so much because they fear the possibility that North Vietnamese tanks will roll down Lane Xang Boulevard as because the Vietnamese are the most aggressive businessmen in town. The Vietnamese community, which probably amounts to more than a quarter of the population of 180,000, is relatively rich and powerful.

Reflecting the genial atmosphere, diplomacy here is

a casual and often friendly matter, with none of the pomp associated with, say, Paris or Geneva.

## On Bikes and in Mercedes

During the recent Lunar New Year celebration, both the North and South Vietnamese Embassies gave open-house parties. A North Vietnamese diplomat gestured toward the crowd of modestly dressed visitors on the lawn and said: "You will notice that guests arrive at the Saigon Embassy in Mercedes cars, while here they come on bicycles."

Much of the business on the cease-fire accord has been transacted at the residence of the Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma. In the pleasant white stucco house overlooking the Mekong River, that also serves as his office, Cabinet meetings are held in the sitting room, which is only a little grander than those of most other financially comfortable Vientiane residents.

There are no barricades or contingents of troops and the few policemen assigned to guard the house are scarcely more than watchmen.

Important meetings between politicians and diplomats representing the two sides have taken place in similar houses around town, usually over drinks or a meal. A lot of horse-trading was also done at the endless parties that are held because of the large size of the diplomatic corps and the small size of Vientiane, with its somewhat rustic character.

Before the French Ambassador, André Ross, departed last week he had to attend

no fewer than 14 going-away dinners, at most of which work on the peace agreement continued over cigars and cognac.

## New Dean, New Problems

The departure of Mr. Ross, who was dean of the diplomatic corps, has caused a minor problem since the new dean is Hoang Co Tuy, the South Vietnamese Ambassador. The Pathet Lao, the North Vietnamese, the Chinese, the Russians and other Communist diplomats invariably refer to him as "the puppet ambassador," which complicates protocol, guest lists and negotiations.

To the outsider the clubby character of the discussions to determine the fate of a nation and the lives of its three million inhabitants has often seemed grotesquely inappropriate.

Serious-minded diplomats were shocked by the delighted gossip shared by Pathet Lao and Vientiane negotiators after a recent scandal, in which a member of the Government team was shot by his wife and had to hobble to conferences on crutches.

"How can you go on like this, joking about the latest indiscretion of such and such a Cabinet minister, when you know that Laotians are still dying out there, even with a theoretical cease-fire in force?" a Western diplomat asked a Laotian official.

"What would you have us do—pull long faces until you foreigners are all satisfied with us?" the official replied. "We Laotians could have settled our differences decades ago if it had not been for meddling by foreigners."