

U.S. Aides Ask Laos to Halt Offensive

By MALCOLM W. BROWNE
Special to The New York Times

SAVANNAKHET, Laos, March 8—American officials have quietly but firmly complained to Laotian military officers about at least one continuing operation by the Government that they consider a clear violation of the cease-fire accord.

According to military sources, the Government operation in question is directed against positions that have been held for a decade or more by Communist forces east of Thakhek, an important town on the Mekong River border between Laos and Thailand.

In recent months Thakhek has been besieged by Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces, which at times seemed on the verge of taking the city. Some 15,000 of Thakhek residents fled to Savannakhet and 10,000 went to Vientiane.

But, by the time the Laotian cease-fire went into effect two weeks ago, Government forces had pushed back the Communists all around Thakhek and had eliminated any real danger to the town.

Since then, the military sources say, Government troops, strongly backed by Laotian Air Force propeller-driven fighter-bombers, have been driving deeply into traditional Communist-held areas. Communities displaying Pathet Lao flags have been regularly bombed.

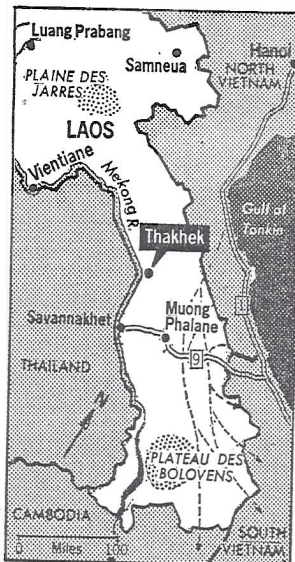
Americans Reported Gone

It is understood that American military men, who had technically been serving as assistant embassy attachés but who before the cease-fire actually helped Laotian troops guide American combat planes to targets, have been withdrawn from Thakhek. The withdrawal is seen as a gesture of American annoyance at the continuing Government offensive, making it clear to Laotian commanders that no Americans will be present to relay requests for American air strikes.

In many parts of this region of southern Laos, where fighting was heaviest just before the cease-fire, opposing sides have been cautiously fraternizing with each other, exchanging drinks and talking.

There have been some not entirely hostile contacts between opposing troops even at Muong Phalane, east of here, which saw some of the heaviest fighting—and bombing by B-52's and other American planes—of the last four months.

In the last weeks before the cease-fire, powerful Communist forces pushed back Government troops along Route 9 west of Muong Phalane. But, thanks to the arrival of Government reinforcements and heavy American bombing, the Communist advance was stopped and the cease-fire found the Commu-



The New York Times/March 9, 1973
Laotian troops are said to have continued drive east of Thakhek.

nists in possession of Muong Phalane but with Government troops secure along the west bank of the Sang Se, just to the West.

"They are happy and we are happy," a Laotian Government colonel said. "There's nothing left of Muong Phalane and most of its people live here now anyway. As long as they stay on their side of the river, we have no complaint."

But southern Laos is a traditional stronghold of the wealthy right-wing aristocracy of Laos, including Prince Boun Oum, leader of the right-wing party and the virtually absolute ruler of a number of southern provinces.

Southern army leaders reject the cease-fire accord and sneer at efforts to make peace with the Communists. They do not hide their disgust with the Laotian Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, who made the agreement with the Communists.

One friend of many high-ranking officers in this area, including Brig. Gen. Nophet Daireuang, commander of Military Region III, predicted today that there would be a military coup d'état against Prince Souvanna Phouma within 40 days. Actually, the prediction

seemed to be mainly a result of wishful thinking. Laotian military leaders are aware that without United States gasoline, ammunition, spare parts, food and money, their forces would collapse in days or even hours.

American officials are understood to have made clear to the Laotian rightists that they would neither support nor tolerate a coup attempt against Prince Souvanna Phouma.

In any case the generals do not seem in any particular hurry to end hostilities and Laotian T-28's loaded with bombs and ammunition seem busier than ever as they roar away from their bases.

In Vientiane today, Government and Communist negotiators reached a general agreement to begin active study of the setting up of joint cease-fire control teams around the country.

The Government proposed establishing three mixed teams in Vientiane and 46 others in the countryside.

Agree in Principle

Diplomats closely concerned with peace-keeping in Laos expressed some satisfaction with the agreement in principle but noted that the Pathet Lao had agreed only to study the needs of the situation.

There has been no agreement as to where teams should be stationed or how many there will be.

Since the cease-fire, talks between the Government and the Pathet Lao have proceeded at a fairly low level, partly because of the absence of the main Pathet Lao leaders from Vientiane.

Today, however, Gen. Phoune Sipraseuth, the Pathet Lao delegation leader, returned to Vientiane after consultations in Samneua and Hanoi, and some diplomats hope this will signal more rapid progress.

The most important Pathet Lao negotiator, Phoumi Vongvichit, is still in Samneua, however, and there is no indication when he will return. A meeting of the central committee of the Neo Lao Hak Xat, the directing party of the Pathet Lao, is in progress. The decisions made will have a strong effect on the future of peace and government in Laos.