

A Will to Stop

Fighting in Laos Is Almost Over

Vientiane, Laos

Laos has essentially liquidated its share of the Indochina war, despite the absence of any formal settlement between the warring sides here during the last five months of negotiations.

"Laos has shown the way," a Western diplomat said. "If only Cambodia and Vietnam would now copy the Laotian model there would be peace. All it takes is the will to stop killing."

Over the last two weeks the Vientiane government has charged the Communist-led Pathet Lao with fewer than ten violations, all of them minor. This represents the lowest level of hostilities recorded in Laos for many years.

In many parts of the country units of the two opposing sides are virtually living with each other, and some of the incidents that occur are more the result of personal quarrels than of war.

PROBLEM

The main difficulty is that until the government of Prince Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao work out a final settlement, the administration of the nation remains in suspended animation.

Under the terms of the February 21 cease-fire agreement in Laos, a coalition government was to have been formed within 30 days, in which key government posts were to be shared equally by the two sides. In the same period, a protocol fixing final military arrangements was also to be signed.

Despite continuous negotiations since then, neither has been done.

Following the formation of a coalition government, a further period of 60 days was stipulated, in which prisoner exchanges and the withdrawal of foreign troops were to be completed, among other things. Meanwhile, both North Vietnamese and American-led Thai "volunteers" remain on Laotian soil.

STALEMATE

Talks are stalemated on six or seven major difficulties between the two sides, sources say.

Among them is Pathet Lao insistence on the stationing of three battalions of Pathet Lao troops in Vientiane and two battalions in the royal capital of Luang Prabang to provide security for Pathet Lao officials in the new government.

Souvanna has agreed to the stationing of some Pathet Lao security troops here — perhaps two or three companies — but nothing like three battalions.

One week ago the permanent Pathet Lao delegate to Vientiane, Colonel Soth Phetrasy, returned to the de facto Pathet Lao capital at Sam Neua, presumably to receive new negotiating instructions. There are hopes here that he may return this week with new and more acceptable terms.

"If the other side shows good faith, we Laotians can quickly arrive at a solution among ourselves," said Pheng Phongsavan, Souvanna's chief negotiator. He said he did not believe that events in neighboring Cam-

bodia should have any effect on a Laotian settlement, whatever their outcome.

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