

One More Try at Peace In Laos

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For the third time in 20 years, the little kingdom of Laos will sign a peace treaty in an attempt to end its debilitating war.

The last two international agreements — in 1954 and 1962 — failed miserably and brought the U.S. into a bloody, clandestine war. The intricate skein of cloak-and-dagger exploits of that war is still being unraveled in the public's view.

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News
Analysis**

Experienced observers in Laos believe this third agreement — to be signed this week by neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and the Communist side — has a better chance of success than the others.

“At long last the diminishing of the cold war is allowing Laos to play its proper role in the world — a political gray area of no great consequence to East and West,” one diplomat said privately.

Interest

It is not only the diminishing cold war, but also the diminishing interest of the U.S. in the fortunes of Laos that gives hope that the long war might be at an end.

The agreement favors the Communist side. A coalition government will be established with half the representatives Communist, but the Communists will effectively retain sole control of 80 per cent of the country and one third of the population.

After the exhaustion of the Vietnam war, these details seem much less important than they might have been ten years ago.

“Let's face it,” said one senior, experienced diplomat in Vientiane. “The U.S. lost 20 years in Laos by interfering in the political process. We are now achieving what the country was moving towards in 1957.”

It was in 1957 that the two most important political personages of the Laotian state, neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma and his Communist half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, formed a government of national union to run Laos.

Elections

But when the Communist side made large gains in elections in 1958, the government was overthrown in a rightist coup and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency moved in to prop up a series of weak governments.

Souvanna Phouma was back again as premier in 1962 after the second international agreement to bring peace to Laos. But the American decision to enter Vietnam cast the die of war for Laos.

North Vietnam needed the Ho Chi Minh trail in the eastern mountains of Laos to send supplies down to the Communist army in South Vietnam. Fighting began for the trail, but spread over much of the country. America poured billions of dollars in military aid and half a billion dollars in economic aid into Laos.

But when a cease-fire agreement was signed last February the results of all this effort were painful to see. The Communist side controlled 80 per cent of the country, with footholds on the Mekong river border with Thailand. Nearly 800,000 people, or about one third of the population, were refugees. Another 800,000 were under Communist control.

A CIA-backed army of Meo tribesmen had been decimated, U.S. planes were providing daily food supplies to 140,000 Meo dependants in the mountains and the U.S. was paying \$100 million a year to 17,000 Thai mercenaries to hold the quivering front line.

Chances

What are the chances for the peace agreement to succeed this time?

Allied diplomats in Vientiane say these factors need to be taken into consideration:

- North Vietnam has an estimated 60,000 troops in Laos, about two thirds of them manning the Ho Chi Minh trail.

The agreement provides for the withdrawal of all foreign troops. Realistically, the best that can be hoped about the Vietnamese forces is that they will be pulled back to the trail area from the front lines around the Plain of Jars.

Diplomats believe there is no hope that North Vietnam will give up the trail unless the South Vietnam war is resolved in its favor.

- The Royal Lao army of more than 100,000 men, although a poor performer in the field against the Communists, is competent at coups. This rightist force is based in the Mekong River bank cities of Vientiane, Savannakhet and Pakse and potentially could cause trouble.

- While the potential for trouble is high, so is the potential for success. Compared to the other warring Indochinese nations of Cambodia and South Vietnam, Laos has some unique advantages.

It has a king, Savang Vatthana, who is given at least lip service respect by all parties in Laos.

It has a durable political leader, Souvanna Phouma, who has risen above party politics into genuine statesmanship.

And it has a “Lao way” of doing things, a subtle ability to resolve differences diplomatically that probably comes naturally to a Buddhist country of barely more than two million people, where everyone seems to be related. Anyway, that is what the “Lao way” is supposed to be.

The Lao never have been left alone long enough to prove it.