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LAOS ACCORDS: VICTORY FOR PATRIOTS

By Richard E. Ward

The cease-fire agreement signed Feb. 21 by the Lao Patriotic Front and the Vientiane government culminates the victories won by Lao liberation forces during a struggle of nearly two decades.

The agreement called for a cease-fire that was to begin the following day with a cessation of U.S. bombing; formation of a National Provisional Coalition Government within 30 days of the signing of the agreement, and the withdrawal of all foreign troops and dismantling of their bases and the dissolution of all special forces, organized and commanded by foreign countries—that is, by the U.S. and Thailand, the only two foreign countries specifically mentioned in the agreement—within 60 days of the establishment of the National Provisional Coalition Government.

Until the day of the signing of the peace agreement the U.S. continued heavy bombing raids in Laos which it first began in May 1964. One day after the cease-fire, which U.S. officials vowed to respect, U.S. aircraft, including B-52s, again bombed in Laos, leaving uncertain whether the U.S. intends to seriously respect the peace. However, indications are that the U.S. will be forced by circumstances to minimize such blatant violations, if only to disengage U.S. prestige from the defeats being suffered by American-backed forces in Laos.

The recent U.S. bombing took place at Paksong, on the western edge of the Bolovens plateau in southern Laos, which had been liberated before the cease-fire went into effect. On the day the U.S. bombing took place, Prince Souvanna Phouma, head of the Vientiane regime, announced he was calling for a resumption of U.S. bombing because of a general offensive he claimed the Pathet Lao began after the cease-fire.

But there was no general offensive, only an apparent last-ditch effort by the reactionary forces, with U.S. air support, to seize a town in the liberated zone on the strategic Bolovens plateau. On the day following the U.S. attack, other Vientiane officials had to admit there was no general offensive and scaled down their charges to a claim that the Pathet Lao moved into Paksong 15 minutes after the cease-fire. The effort to retake Paksong failed and it is possible the U.S. will not continue overtly to assist an effort it knows to be futile.

Reactionaries exhausted

For prior to the cease-fire, the Patriotic Forces, as the allied Pathet Lao and Patriotic Neutralists forces are officially designated in the peace agreement, had been waging a successful major offensive, adding to the liberated zone, which now comprises four-fifths of the national territory, and inflicting heavy losses on the pro-U.S. forces in Laos. Those forces are just about played out despite enormous U.S. air support.

The U.S. bombing which began on a limited scale secretly in 1964, under the guise of "armed reconnaissance" missions, reached peaks of over 1000 sorties per day under the Nixon administration and was at the rate of approximately 400 sorties just prior to the cease-fire.

Other major provisions of the peace agreement include respect for the 1962 international communique on the neutrality of Laos; respect for the fundamental national rights of Laos, free of foreign intervention, and the establishment of democratic liberties for the people, including the right of persons forced by U.S. aggression into concentration camps to return to their homes in the

liberated zone.

The peace agreement also calls for democratic elections to establish a National Coalition Government to replace the temporary National Provisional Coalition Government, whose composition will be determined by mutual agreement with each side designating half of the members. For the present, the agreement specifies that the reality of two zones in Laos must be recognized, meaning that each side will administer its respective zone pending the establishment of a permanent national government. However, prior to this period, as noted, the Patriotic forces will comprise half of the new provisional government.

In effect, the agreement implicitly and explicitly recognizes the preeminent position of the Patriotic forces. It also means that the Pathet Lao and Patriotic Neutralist forces may defend themselves against any encroachment by U.S.-backed armed elements, the greater part of which will have to be disbanded under the terms of the agreement. These latter include Thai mercenary forces, recruited in Thailand by the CIA, the CIA-sponsored special forces under Gen. Vang Pao, and the U.S. military and para-military forces secretly operating in Laos. These provisions of the agreement make it demonstrably clear that the peace agreement represents a colossal defeat for the U.S. military effort in Laos and the reactionary forces supported by the U.S.

Early U.S. intervention

At the time of the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Indochina, the specific accord for Laos provided for the regroupment of the Pathet Lao forces into two northern provinces, pending their incorporation into a national army. In short, there was no guarantee for the safety of liberated areas if the 1954 agreement was violated. The U.S. was determined not only to prevent the emergence of a democratic, neutralist Laos, as provided by the 1954 accord, it also embarked upon a program for the complete extermination of the Pathet Lao under the leadership of Prince Souphanouvong.

The U.S. tried to establish a reactionary, pro-U.S. regime in Vientiane, arming rightist elements and promoting a series of rightwing coups against the neutralist government of Prince Souvanna Phouma. Following the establishment of a government of national union with the participation of Pathet Lao and Patriotic Neutralist elements and a significant electoral success by the Pathet Lao in 1958, there was a U.S.-promoted coup. In the following year the Lao Patriotic Front was declared illegal and half of its leadership, including Prince Souphanouvong, was imprisoned in July 1959. The Pathet Lao leaders made a spectacular escape from the prison in May 1960 and made their way back to the relatively small liberated zone in northern Laos and reorganized the Pathet Lao armed forces.

In August, a Captain Kong Le organized a coup to restore a neutralist government, which lasted only until

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December. But the neutralist armed forces made an alliance with the Pathet Lao, which was followed by a vast offensive in which the reactionary forces were swept from about two-thirds of the country from January to April 1961. The U.S. backed forces then had to agree to a cease-fire or be completely defeated.

There followed a dual series of consultations, an international conference on Laos in Geneva and meetings, among the Laotian parties. After the three Laotian groups, the rightists, neutralists and Pathet Lao agreed on the formation of a provisional government of national union, the international conference endorsed the independence and neutrality of Laos and called for the withdrawal of foreign forces.

Instead of withdrawing, the U.S. maintained a large corps of CIA "advisors" who organized the special forces comprised of Meo mercenary troops under Gen. Vang Pao. At the same time, the U.S. made plans for undermining the government of National Union, secretly backing the rightwing neutralists, including Prince Souvanna Phouma. In April 1963, the foreign minister, a Patriotic Neutralist, was assassinated and shortly thereafter full-scale hostilities began between the U.S.-backed forces and the Patriotic forces.

Domination of pro-U.S. rightists

Increasingly the Vientiane regime came under the domination of the pro-U.S. rightists. Together with Gen. Vang Pao's CIA-sponsored forces, they made increasing encroachments on the liberated zone. One of the major U.S. aims in Laos was to establish strategic bases throughout the liberated zone to attack the liberation forces and to support U.S. aggression in Vietnam.

For example, the U.S. established a large radar station at Pha Thi, a mountain in the province of Sam Neua, only 17 miles from the North Vietnamese border. This station provided radar guidance for U.S. bombings of North Vietnam and the liberated zone of northern Laos. The Laotian liberation forces overran this secret U.S. base, one of the most important American installations in Laos, during a two-day offensive in March 1968. Informed Washington sources have stated privately that the loss of this base was directly related to the timing of the partial U.S. bombing halt of North Vietnam a few weeks later.

The beginning of the end for the pro-U.S. forces, which had been suffering a number of significant defeats, followed the occupation of the Plain of Jars, part of the liberated zone, by Gen. Vang Pao's forces during the summer of 1969. By the time the Pathet Lao counter-offensive ended in early February 1970, a large portion of Vang Pao troops had been lost, despite unprecedented aerial support by the U.S. and the introduction of Thai mercenary forces.

At the same time, the greater number of the U.S. bases within the liberated zone, also manned by Vang Pao-CIA mercenaries, were overtaken. From that period, Vang Pao's troops, meant to be the cutting edge of U.S. ground operations, became increasingly demoralized. Their offensive capabilities gradually dwindled to mere nibbling operations, even though an attempt was made to revitalize the CIA army with Thai mercenaries, who were said by Western sources to number 12,000 at the time of the cease-fire last week.

With the weakening of the CIA-backed troops, the U.S. decided upon a new strategy. This involved the massive use of Saigon troops with the aim of driving straight across southern Laos to the Thai border and attempting to create a "cordon sanitaire" to strangle the flow of supplies reaching the liberation forces in Cambodia and South Vietnam. The Pathet Lao command was well aware of

U.S. plans and told this correspondent in June 1970 that in all probability that would be the next major step of the Nixon administration in its drive for a military victory in Indochina.

The invasion by the U.S.-Saigon forces began in February 1971, and it proved to be one of the greatest setbacks suffered by the Saigon armed forces, ranking alongside the previous defeats during the 1968 Tet offensive and the 1970 invasion of Cambodia. The U.S.-Saigon drive into Laos inched its way across the country, never getting near the Thai border. Within a few weeks the liberation forces of Laos and Vietnam carried the day, completely routing the Saigon troops which had to pull out the entire remnants of their invading forces.

Earlier the Lao Patriotic Front, following their victory at the Plain of Jars in 1970, had issued proposals for peace negotiations, but they were successively rebuffed by the Vientiane regime. Not until the summer of 1972 did Prince Souvanna Phouma agree to peace talks which finally got underway in October. However, the negotiations made little progress until the U.S. was willing to make peace in Vietnam. Indeed there was little possibility of progress because the U.S. wanted to maintain its bombing of the "Ho Chi Minh trail" in Laos until the last possible moment in hopes of maintaining military pressure on the liberation forces of South Vietnam. Despite the saturation bombing of southern Laos and the southern region of North Vietnam there was never any evidence of equipment shortages among the liberation forces of Cambodia or South Vietnam. The maintenance of this flow of supplies, despite U.S. bombs, was evidence of the heroism of the men and women liberation fighters who transported the supplies and the solidarity between the liberation forces of the three countries of Indochina.

Renewed violations

One of the dangers of the forthcoming period is that the U.S. will try to back pro-U.S. elements in making encroachments on the liberated zones in Laos and South Vietnam under the pretext of North Vietnamese violations of the cease-fire agreements. If there are violations, as are already taking place, by the Saigon and Vientiane forces, then the liberation forces cannot be expected to let themselves be annihilated but will maintain necessary cooperation until the military encroachments cease.

The coming months are going to be crucial for the peace in Laos and will reveal U.S. intentions. If the U.S. dismantles its mercenary operations in Laos and ceases the secret CIA para-military activities and Air America flights in support of the mercenary troops, then a solid step will be taken toward consolidating peace in Laos.

Another pretext the U.S. might put forward for maintaining its intervention in Laos is the question of American prisoners. During the long years of U.S. bombing in Laos, numerous American planes were downed and the pilots were listed as missing by the Pentagon. Now it turns out that there are relatively few American prisoners compared to those reported as missing. The truth is that most of the alleged missing pilots died when their planes were downed because of the mountainous terrain in Laos. The Pathet Lao has no possible interest in keeping American prisoners and can be expected to release all Americans it holds in accordance with the peace agreements, assuming the U.S. definitively ceases its aggressive military actions in Laos, as stipulated by the peace agreements.

Whatever course the U.S. adopts, it is clear that a U.S. effort to sabotage the peace cannot stop the full liberation of the country. The peace accord on Laos represents the repudiation of nearly two decades of savage U.S. in-

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tervention and aggression in Laos. That which could not be accomplished by large-scale U.S. intervention, together with the Saigon and Thai troops, as well as Lao mercenaries, cannot be achieved by a new strategy involving a "low-profile" for U.S. intervention through the CIA.

