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Laos
Internal Control Commission*

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FAR EAST REPORT

Laos-Type Settlement Not for Viet Nam

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Special to The Star

VIENTIANE, Laos.—“Well, the Communists haven't taken it over yet,” remarked the Western diplomat. Using the measuring rod of cold war politics, he was saying, in effect, “Laos is a howling success.”

The country has remained wide open to all the political winds that blow: winds from the anti-Communist West, from Russia and China and North Viet Nam, from India and other “non-aligned” quarters. All work on this little country with embassies, agents, and endless talk about the prospects of the Laos experiment. There is not a single one of them except, perhaps, North Viet Nam which actively wants the Geneva-built mechanism to break down.

Like an old jalopy held together with paper clips and string, the thing wheezes along. Nobody thought it could run for as long as two years, as it has. Almost everyone accepts it for want of a better one and for fear of a worse one. But is it a success?

Here in the capital you can

This is the third of several reports on the Indo-China area of Southeast Asia by Mr. and Mrs. Kuhn, distinguished foreign correspondents who are on their eighth tour of the Far East.

watch an attempt to govern by a coalition with Communists, an attempt that is brave but foredoomed in the long run. What the powers in Geneva wished on the country in 1962 was the troika formula, the same idea which the Russians once tried to foist on the United Nations secretariat. The three political factions in Laos, Communists, neutralists and anti-Communists, which had been fighting one another, were told to bury their differences, sit down together, and work for the peace and welfare of the country and its two or three million people. Each faction in the coalition was to hold a veto over the other two.

Communists Leave

Today the cabinet table in Vientiane is set for three, but only two have come to it for more than a year. All but a couple of minor Communist

ministers quit the capital for a new headquarters further north a year ago. They say they are afraid for their personal safety here, and they have a point. One of their leaders, the Foreign Minister, fell in the doorway of his Vientiane residence with a bullet in his head a year ago.

The Government goes through the motions of governing with only two thirds of the troika. But the Communists who take no part in the decisions reject them all as illegal.

Under the Geneva accord, the troika formula applied also to the three political armies, then harassing one another and the countryside. Each army was to reduce itself to 10,000 men; they would then integrate and together look after the security of the country.

The anti-Communist force, whose leader is a working member of the Government, today numbers between 50,000 and 60,000. The Communist-led Pathet Lao force, reinforced by permanent cadres and occasional battalions of North Viet Name, is estimated at 18,000 men. The neutralist army of some 10,000 is commanded by

the popular ex-paratrooper Kong Le, who has broken with the Pathet Lao but has still not merged his men with the right-wing forces. Each of the three armies has staked out a rough claim to territory. But the Communists repeatedly nibble at the others' preserves, trying to keep them off balance. It is hardly a formula for security or peace.

Restraining Effect

To watch over the Geneva accord, and to investigate and report any violations, the powers at Geneva installed still a third troika. The International Control Commission using field teams of Canadian, Indian and Polish officers, has been a very model of discord, delay and paralysis. The best one can say for the Commission is that its units stationed in various parts of Laos may have had a restraining effect on violence.

Such is the nature of the “success.” Laos rocks along with little government, less security and still less international control. Its people never knew whether they can safely farm their fields, fish their streams, hew their wood and carry their crops to market; Coalition with Communists is again proving unworkable; international control of this type is again shown to be a polite charade.

The Communist-led Pathet Lao forces keep clear of the Mekong valley, for fear that they will again bring American Marines to Thailand just across the river. The right-wing army keeps clear of the easternmost part of Laos which borders Viet Nam, knowing from bitter experience that the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail running along that border is a sacred preserve of the North Viet Name and their Viet Cong underlings. These are the built-in restraints and vetoes that operate in Laos, these rather than the ones laid down in Geneva.

The Laos experience holds implications and lessons for other parts of Southeast Asia. One hears suggestions that it might be applied in South Viet Nam. There would be an official withdrawal of outside forces, a coalition government, and international supervision. Perhaps nothing better was possible in the Laos of 1962. But if anyone in Paris or Washington thinks a “Laos-type settlement” would bring peace to Viet Nam in 1964, let him come here to Laos and judge for himself.

Tomorrow: Aid staff in Laos alert and proud.