

Frontier Disputes with North Vietnam. - M. Sananikone granted Emergency Powers. - New Cabinet. - Laos claims Fulfilment of Geneva Agreements. - Pathet Lao Forces surrender to Laotian Army. - Chinese and North Vietnamese Protests.

The Laotian Premier, M. Phoui Sananikone, was granted emergency powers for a year by the National Assembly on Jan. 14, and formed a new Cabinet ten days later. These developments followed a period of crisis caused by dissensions inside the ruling right-wing parties, the growth of internal Communist influence, and frontier incidents with North Vietnam which caused fears of external Communist pressure.

Divisions amongst the Government's supporters had been intensified by its decision to devalue the national currency (the kip), which hit a number of influential people deriving large profits from black-market transactions. The devaluation—from 35 to 80 kips to the U.S. dollar - took place on Oct. 10, 1958. in connexion with a U.S. Laotian agreement whereby the U.S. Government undertook to resume economic aid to Laos [this aid had been suspended in August because of the unsatisfactory exchange position, the unofficial rate for the dollar being double the official quotation.] Together with the currency devaluation, the Laotian Government lifted the existing restrictions on foreign trade and reintroduced freedom for financial transfers to foreign countries.

The pro-Communist *Neo Lao Haksat* ("Patriotic Front") under Prince Souphannou Vong had considerably extended its influence after the last general elections, and it was reported that it had won the support in the National Assembly, not only of the other left-wing groups, but also of a number of right-wing deputies critical of the Government's policy. Rumours were current during December that the Army was planning to seize power in January in order to avert the Communist threat, with the result that a number of leading members of the *Neo Lao Haksat* fled to North Vietnam.

The North Vietnamese Government alleged on Dec. 27 that Laotian forces had on three occasions crossed the frontier in the Huong Lap area of Quang Tri province, and that Laotian planes had flown over North Vietnamese territory. In a Note of Jan. 1, 1959. M. Pham Van-Dong (the North Vietnamese Premier) alleged that Laotian troops had encroached upon Vietnamese territory in this area on the previous day and opened fire on rural guards; a second Note of Jan. 5 proposed direct negotiations between the two countries to settle frontier disputes. The Laotian Government, which denied the North Vietnamese allegations, had meanwhile brought counter-charges on Jan. 3 that North Vietnamese forces had occupied a village six miles inside Laotian territory. M. Sananikone alleged on Jan. 11 that the frontier incursions were connected with the political situation inside Laos; that *Neo Lao Haksat* supporters had tried to flee to North Vietnam

to establish contact with former *Pathet Lao* elements who had “refused to integrate themselves in the Laotian national community”; and that these elements were receiving military training in North Vietnam.

The area involved in the dispute was slightly north of the 17th parallel (the dividing line between North and South Vietnam), and about 15 miles from the new highway between Savannakhet (in western Laos) and the South Vietnamese port of Tourane, which is designed to offer Laos an alternative outlet to the sea to that through Siam. This frontier had been disputed between Laos and Annam before the Second World War; Laotian official spokesmen, however, claimed that North Vietnamese forces had crossed the frontier established by the French, which had been recognized by the Vietminh under the Geneva Agreements of 1954. Western correspondents pointed out that the area was one of mountains and jungles, sparsely populated by primitive tribes, and that either side might have crossed the undemarcated frontier accidentally.

M. Phoui Sananikone asked the Assembly on Jan. 12 to grant him emergency powers for 12 months, in view of the tension on the frontier and inside the country.

M. Sananikone proposed that during this period he should be empowered to govern without reference to the Assembly; to change the Cabinet and redistribute administrative posts at will; to revise the Constitution in such a way as to increase the Government's authority and stability; and to seek a settlement of the frontier dispute on the basis of peaceful co-existence and defence of Laotian rights. As the Premier's programme also empowered him to “employ members of the Assembly in administrative and diplomatic positions,” it was assumed, though not explicitly stated, that the Assembly would be suspended. The grant of emergency powers also involved the automatic postponement of general elections, which were due to be held later in the year.

During the Assembly's debate **Prince Souphannou Vong** opposed the Government's proposals as likely to lead to a dictatorial regime, increase internal tensions, and create a danger of war with North Vietnam. Other Opposition spokesmen accused the Government of carrying out arrests and other repressive measures designed to destroy the Opposition parties, and criticised the devaluation of the kip on the grounds that it had led to stagnation of trade, higher prices, and hardship for the people. Replying to the debate, **M. Sananikone** gave assurances that he had no intention of declaring the Opposition parties illegal and that he would exercise his powers within the limits imposed by the Constitution.

The Assembly voted the emergency powers on Jan. 14 by 28 votes to 16, with three abstentions, the Opposition votes being cast by the *Neo Lao Haksat* and the *Santiphab* (‘Neutrality’) party.

M. Phom Sananikone formed a new Cabinet on Jan. 24 with the aim of “providing a new impulse towards social progress, economic reform, and the fight against Communist subversion.” In addition to members of his own party, the Laotian People's Rally (R.P.L., an alliance of right-wing groups formed after the May elections), the new Cabinet also included representatives of the Committee for the Defence of National Interests” (C.D.I.N.), an organization of younger officers and officials, and of the Army. The Ministers in the new Government were:

M. Phom Sananikone (R.P.L.)—Prime Minister; M. Katay Don Sasorith (R.P.L.) Deputy Premier and Interior; M. Khamphan Panya (C.D.I.N.) - Foreign Affairs, Education, and information. M. Thao Leuam (C.D.I.N.) Finance and economy, General Sounthone Pathammavong (Independent)

Defence and Veterans' Affairs; M. Bong Souvannouvong (Independent) Telecommunications and Culture.

The following were appointed Secretaries of State: M. Pan (R.P.L.), Public Works and Transport, M. Tan Choulamontry (R.P.L.), Justice; M. Khoranhok Souvannavong (R.P.L.), Interior; M. Liep Soumpholphakdy (R.P.L.), Agriculture; M. Sisoukna Champassak (C.D.I.N.), Information; M. Impeng Suryabhay (C.D.I.N.), Education; Lieut. Colonel Oudone Sananikone (C.D.I.N.), Social Affairs, Colonel Phoumi Nosavan (Independent), Defence.

The political basis of the Government was broadened by the inclusion of M. Bong Souvannouvong, a left centre Independent and former leader of the *Santiphab* Party, who had become disillusioned with the policies of the *Neo Lao Hak Sat*. The representation of the C.D.I.N. was increase from four to five, while in addition both General Pathammavong (the Chief of Staff) and Colonel Nosavan are closely connected with the C.D.I.N. although not formally members of that organization.

In a letter on Jan. 17 to the U.N. Secretary-General, Dr.Hammarskjold, the Laotian Government formally protested against the alleged occupation of part of its territory by North Vietnamese troops; although the letter was not published, it was reported to have asked for an observation mission to be sent to the disputed area. M. Pham Van-Dong, in turn, protested against the alleged Laotian violation of the frontier in a letter of Jan.23 to the Indian chairman of the International Control Commission for Laos; the letter also accused the Laotian Government of infringing the Geneva Agreements by allegedly “repressive measures” against the *Neo Lao Haksat* and by large scale importation of U.S. arms, and asked for a meeting of the Commission, which had been adjourned *sine die* since July 19, 1958.

At a press conference on Feb. 11 M. Phoui Sananikone announced that as his Government had fulfilled all its obligations under the Geneva Agreements, it would henceforth recognize the United Nations as the sole arbitration body for disputes in the area.

After referring to the “campaign of false accusations being conducted by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which is trying to revive the Control Commission set up by the Geneva Agreements,” M. Sananikone said: “The Royal Government considers that the application of the Geneva Agreements has been completed in its entirety. By signing the agreements, the Royal Government under took to cease hostilities and to reintegrate in the national community those Laotian citizens who were not on the side of the royal forces during hostilities. These two engagements have been kept. The fulfilment of the agreements is therefore completed, and Laos can no longer admit any other arbitration than that of the United Nations. As for the interpretation of the agreements which declares that they apply to Laos as long as the reunification of Vietnam has not taken place, the Royal Government cannot accept it. It is contrary to the spirit and the letter of the agreements. No Government worthy of the name can

mortgage the political future of its country on the basis of the situation existing in a neighbouring country. The same is true with regard to a certain Laotian political party (i.e. the *Neo Lao Hak Sat*) and to certain foreign Powers aiming at the revival of the International Control Commission in order to have it arbitrate in internal and international affairs in which Laos is concerned. As an independent and sovereign State, the Kingdom of Laos cannot tolerate interference in its internal affairs.”

The Laotian Government's decision was denounced on Feb, 16 by the North Vietnamese Government, and on Feb. 18 by Marshal Chen Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister, who issued a statement expressing “grave concern over the fact that the United States is openly investigating and supporting the Royal Laotian Government to repudiate the Geneva Agreements.” On Feb. 19 Marshal Chen Yi formally asked Mr. Selwyn Lloyd (British Foreign Secretary) and Mr. Gromyko (Soviet Foreign Minister), as co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference, to take speedy action on Laos's “unilateral repudiation” of the agreements concluded at Geneva.

It was announced in Moscow on March 26 that the Soviet Government (representing one of the co-chairmen at the Geneva Conference) had sent a Note to the U.K. Government (representing the other co-chairman) suggesting that the two chairmen should request the International Commission on Laos to resume as soon as possible its work of supervision and control over the implementation of the Geneva Agreements on Indo-China.

The announcement said that the Soviet Government shared the concern of the Chinese and North Vietnamese Governments over “the situation developing in the Laos area, which is seriously endangering peace and the security of the peoples of Indo-China.” It referred to allegations by the Chinese and North Vietnamese Foreign Ministers, in their letters to the co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference [see above], to the effect that large quantities of American arms and ammunition were being introduced into Laos, that a sizeable group of U.S. military personnel had been sent to that country, and that the U.S. Government were “openly inciting the Laotian Government to violate the Geneva Agreement on Laos.” After recalling the refusal of the Laotian Premier to allow the International Commission to resume its work, the Soviet Note asserted that all these actions and statements were evidence of “a desire on the part of aggressive forces to convert Laos into a foreign military base and an instrument for creating tension in the area of Indo-China. ...”

Mr. Nehru told the *Raja Sabha* on April 20 that the Indian Government had requested the co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference to reconvene the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Laos.

Earlier the same day the Deputy Minister of External Affairs (Mrs. Lakshmi Menon) had told the Upper House that the Government of India were aware of the statement made by the Laotian Premier on the subject of the Geneva Agreement, and that complaints that arms and war material were being brought into Laos contrary to the provisions of that agreement had also been brought to the notice of the Indian Government. Mr. Nehru stressed in his statement, however, that the Government could give no definite reply about those complaints, as they had no machinery to make an inquiry, he also refused to comment when it was suggested that developments in Laos were “a prelude to that country joining SEATO.”

It was reported on May 20 from Vientiane (the capital of Laos) that the Laotian Government had demanded the submission of two battalions of Communist troops, belonging to the former *Pathet Lao*, which had refused to be integrated into the Laotian Army as provided under the Geneva Agreements.

According to reports by foreign correspondents, the Laotian Government had ordered on May 11 that the two battalions, numbering 1,500 men, should surrender their arms. When they refused they had been surrounded on May 14 by Laotian forces and denied supplies of food and water, one of the battalions, stationed a few miles north of Luang Prabang, had then surrendered, while the other, stationed near the provincial capital of Xieng Khouang was negotiating on the terms of submission.

The crisis had been developing since the agreements in November 1957 between the Laotian Government and the Communists for the return of the two northern provinces to royal authority, the admission of *Pathet Lao* leaders into the Government, and the integration of the *Pathet Lao* forces into the Royal Laotian Army [see 1588] B]. Whilst carrying out other provisions of the agreement, the Communists had resisted on various pretexts the integration of its “legal” combatants into the Army. Laotian Government sources alleged that the surrender of the two battalions had been held up by a “hard core” of Communist officers.

Under the terms offered to the two battalions—announced in decrees published in March and April—about 100 officers and senior n.c.o.'s were to retain their ranks and to receive guarantees of their pension rights; provision was also made for some back pay and the retention of seniority. Prince Souphannou Vong was reported to have recommended acceptance of these terms, which were to have taken effect on May 11, but some senior officers had objected, resulting in the Government's action.

About 600 officers and men of the second battalion refused to accept the Government's terms and were reported on May 25 to be moving through the jungle towards the North Vietnamese frontier. The Laotian Government announced that the action of these troops had in consequence assumed the character of an open rebellion, and that, following the failure of all attempts to persuade them to surrender peacefully “matters have reached a point where only a military solution appears possible.”

The Laotian Government's action was violently denounced by both the North Vietnamese and Chinese Communist Governments; a strong protest was issued by the Foreign Ministry in Peking, which also sent letters to the British and Soviet Governments complaining at the measures taken by the Laotian Government to “integrate” the two *Pathet Lao* battalions. The Chinese Government described this action as a “serious violation” of the Geneva Agreements and as “tantamount to launching openly a civil war in Laos.” The North Vietnamese Government similarly complained to the Government of India at the Laotian Government's action, and demanded that the International Control Commission should return to Laos immediately.

In London, a Foreign Office spokesman said that in the British view the Laotian Government had consistently acted in accordance with the Geneva Agreements, to which it had explicitly reaffirmed its adherence on March 26, and that the integration of the *Pathet Lao* troops in no way

infringed the agreements.—(Times - Manchester Guardian - Le Monde, Paris - New York Times
- Soviet Embassy Press Department, London - The Hindu, Madras) (**Prev. rep. 16398 A.**)

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