

Military Coup by Paratroop Commander. - Captain Kong Lae forms Revolutionary Committee. - Resignation of Somsanith Government. - Prince Souvanna Phouma assumes Premiership. - Negotiations with General Phoumi Nosavan. - Counter-Revolutionary Committee formed by General Phoui and Prince Boum Oun.- Renewed Pathet Lao Activity in Northern Laos. - Capture of Sam Neua Town. - Prince Souvanna Phouma's Government establishes Diplomatic Relations with U.S.S.R.- Acceptance of Soviet Economic Aid. - Resumption of U.S. Aid after Temporary Interruption.

The Second Parachute Battalion of the Royal Laotian Army, under the command of Captain Kong Lae (26), seized complete control of Vientiane during the night of Aug. 8-9 while most members of the Government of Tiao Somsanith were in the royal capital of Luang Prabang (130 miles to the north) attending the last funeral rites of the late King Sisavang Vong [see 17143 B]. The leaders of the *coup* set up a "revolutionary committee" which proclaimed its loyalty to King Savang Vatthana and announced that it had established contact with Prince Souvanna Phouma, the President of the National Assembly and former Prime Minister, with a view to his forming a new government which would act in accordance with their aims. These aims were set forth in communiques by the committee and in broadcasts by Captain Kong Lae himself over Vientiane radio on Aug. 9-10.

The committee claimed that it had taken control of all civil and military authority in Laos and that "the military *coup* is aimed at consolidating the nation, religion, throne and constitution." It had assumed "the task of maintaining the neutrality of Laos and preserving friendly relations with countries which respect our internal agreements," and had ordered the Army and police to remain calm and continue their duties until further orders were issued by the revolutionary High Command. The committee stated that its programme would include (a) the ending of "corruption" and a "cleaning-up" of Parliament and the administration; (b) a fight against "foreign pressure" and a demand that foreign troops should leave the country [under agreements with the Laotian Government a small French base is maintained in the country and a French mission assists in the training of the Laotian Army; there is also a U.S. military training mission]; (c) "respect for the U.N. Charter and for neutrality," maintenance of friendly relations with all countries, and respect for existing agreements; (d) acceptance of aid "without conditions" from any country.

Captain Kong Lae declared that the revolutionary committee would “open an inquiry on the subject of soldiers and officials who have acquired excessive financial rewards well above their salaries” and would “immediately expel from the country all foreign soldiers.” He added: “The infiltrations of a great Power are increasing daily. Every organization in the country has a group attached to it. Even my own battalion has 10 Americans whom the Government has authorized to infiltrate into our ranks. There are also many cases of this outside my own regiment.” Captain Kong Lae accused former Governments of having led the country “completely astray” and of inducing Laos to “accept the money of a great Power”; he refuted accusations that the Laotian people were Communist, and denounced the circumstances of “brother having had to fight brother” [i.e. in the civil war with the *Pathet Lao*].

General Ouan Rattikone, Chief of Staff of the Laotian armed forces, arrived by air in Vientiane on Aug. 10 for discussions with the revolutionary committee, while Prince Souvanna Phouma was reported to have been asked by the committee to undertake a mission to Luang Prabang. Captain Kong Lae reiterated on Aug. 11 that the Prince had been asked to visit Luang Prabang on the committee's behalf, and also stated that the committee hoped that the Somsanith Cabinet would resign and that Prince Souvanna Phouma would be asked to form a new government; he added, however, that the Prince would accept only if the constitutional forms were completely observed. Prince Souvanna Phouma himself had previously declared that he was “astonished” that his name had been included in the list of the committee's members; that “as President of the National Assembly, which is a neutral body,” he had protested against this action; and that he had asked the committee to remove his name. General Ouan Rattikone returned from Vientiane to Luang Prabang on Aug. 12; he was quoted as saying that he was satisfied that the revolutionary committee had acted without assistance from outside sources.

Meanwhile Hanoi radio (North Vietnam) announced on Aug. 12 that the central committee of the *Neo Lao Haksat* (the political organization of the *Pathet Lao* rebels) had declared its full support for Captain Kong Lae's committee and was prepared to negotiate with him or with any government formed with his support; the *Neo Lao Haksat* suggested the formation of a coalition government to carry out the Vientiane committee's programme, and the unification of the *Pathet Lao* and Vientiane forces in order to spread the revolutionary movement and “punish the partisans of American imperialism.”

The Laotian Assembly met in Vientiane on Aug. 13, nearly two-thirds of the members being present, passed a vote of no-confidence in Tiao Somsanith's Government, and authorized Prince Souvanna to report their decision to the King in Luang Prabang; it was understood that the King would be asked to appoint as Prime Minister either Prince Souvanna himself or Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak (head of the former ruling family of the southern principality of Champassak, which had been merged in the Kingdom of Laos under the French protectorate). The decision was taken after the Assembly had been addressed by Captain Kong Lae, and while the Parliament building was occupied by his parachute troops and surrounded by a large crowd of demonstrators whom the Captain had led to the Assembly; this action by Captain Kong Lae followed the failure of renewed talks between the revolutionary committee and General Ouan Rattikone, who had returned to Vientiane earlier in the day. After the vote, a delegation from the Assembly (not including Prince Souvanna) left for Luang Prabang on Aug. 14, and later the same day Vientiane radio again claimed that the Somsanith Cabinet had agreed to resign.

Prince Souvanna Phouma announced on Aug. 15 that he had been invited by King Savang Vatthana to form a new Government; it was reported from Vientiane that the royal decree appointing the Prince had been brought to the capital during the day by Tiao Somsanith himself. The Prince submitted his Cabinet to the Assembly on Aug. 16, taking the portfolios of Foreign Affairs and Defence in addition to the Premiership.

The other members of the Cabinet were: Touby Lyfoung—Justice, Information and Religious Affairs; Quinim Pholsena—Interior, Sports and Youth; Khamking Souvanlasy—Finance and Economy; Kham Sing—Public Works, Posts and Telegraphs; Khamsouk Keola—Health, Education and Public security; Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak—Secretary of State for Defence and Ex-Servicemen; Tiao (Prince) Sisoumang—Secretary of State for Health and Rural Affairs.

No leader of the *coup* nor any extreme Left-wing personalities were included in the new Government; the new Minister of the Interior (Quinim Pholsena), however, was the leader of the strictly neutralist *Santiphab* party and had strongly denounced alleged fraudulent manipulation of the last general elections by supporters of the former Government. Only one Minister, Touby Lyfoung (a leader of the Meo tribe), was taken over from the Somsanith Administration.

The new Cabinet received a vote of confidence from the National Assembly on Aug. 17, although at least a third of the deputies were reported to be absent in Luang Prabang. The Assembly also elected a new president, Oun Heuan Norasing, to replace Prince Souvanna, after it had been informed by Captain Kong Lae that “the people did not approve” the Assembly's original choice of Ngon Sananikone, a Minister in the Somsanith Government.

Presenting his Cabinet, Prince Souvanna said that his aims were (a) to restore internal peace in the country; (b) to pursue a genuinely neutral foreign policy while respecting all existing treaties with other countries; (c) to accept aid “without strings” from any country; and (d) to foster all existing good relations while seeking friendship with other countries which were not “enemies of Laos.”

After the investiture of the new Government, Captain Kong Lae announced that his revolutionary committee had handed over all administrative powers to it. Despite this announcement, however, the committee was not disbanded but set up its headquarters in the Defence Ministry building; the Captain subsequently made it clear that he intended to continue his activities until a neutralist policy was actually in operation.

Leaflets were dropped over Vientiane on Aug. 16-18 by an aircraft under the orders of General Phoumi Nosavan (Defence Minister in the Somsanith Government) violently denouncing Captain Kong Lae, and claiming that the General had been authorized by the Somsanith Government to re-establish its control over the capital. General Phoumi was stated to have established headquarters in the southern Laotian town of Savannakhet, and to have the support of many regional military commanders in other parts of the country.

After meetings in Luang Prabang between the King, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and General Phoumi Nosavan, it was announced on Aug. 29 that agreement had been reached for the

formation of a new government including representatives of both sides, under the Prince's leadership. Before the agreement was announced there had been a confused period of negotiations, with a continuing threat of civil war between the “counter-coup *d’etat*” forces and those of Captain Kong Lae.

General Phoumi stated on Aug. 19 that five battalions of his troops were moving north to recapture Vientiane, claiming that he had the support of the Royal Army outside the capital and alleging that the latter city was effectively under Communist control, with *Pathet Lao* agents “directing the policies of this brave but naive and deluded young officer Kong Lae.” At the same time members of the National Assembly at the General's headquarters at Savannakhet claimed that 23 of the 59 deputies had fled from the capital and that many more wished to do so but were held under house arrest there; it was also reported that Prince Boun Oum and Touby Lyfoung had left Vientiane to join General Phoumi.

Prince Souvanna Phouma, however, announced on Aug. 21 that General Phoumi Nosavan had ordered his troops to halt their advance after the two leaders had had a talk by radio; he added that he had invited General Phoumi to Vientiane for further discussions, and that the latter had agreed to the re-appointment as Chief of Staff of General Ouan Rattikone (who had resigned his post after the formation of the Prince's new Government). The Chief of Staff resumed his duties the same day, swearing an oath of loyalty to the Vientiane Government and at the same time appointing Captain Kong Lae as his “special assistant.” Nevertheless, the new Government was still awaiting royal confirmation of its appointment, and it was reported that the representative sent by Prince Souvanna to Luang Prabang to obtain this had been detained by officials loyal to General Phoumi. More leaflets issued by General Phoumi's “counter-coup *d’etat* committee” were dropped over Vientiane on August 22.

A new effort towards a reconciliation was made by the Vientiane Government on Aug. 23, when Prince Souvanna unexpectedly flew to Savannakhet to see General Phoumi (who continued to refuse to visit the capital); at the same time it was announced that Captain Kong Lae's parachutists were being withdrawn to the outskirts of Vientiane. During the day General Phoumi's forces, advancing down the Mekong River from Luang Prabang, captured the river port of Sanakarm, 75 miles from Vientiane. Prince Souvanna Phouma, however, said on his return to Vientiane that “everything has been arranged and there is no further problem”; while giving no details of his talks with the General, he added that the “first task is to restore order in the Army,” reiterating that there was “mutual goodwill” and therefore “no problem which cannot be solved.” At the same time he confirmed that General Phoumi's troops had occupied the town of Paksane (93 miles east of Vientiane), but refused to comment on reports that they had been permitted to travel through Siam in civilian clothes.

In further public statements on Aug. 24-25 Prince Souvanna claimed that a new Government of national union would be formed within a few days and that General Phoumi would be free to join it “if he so wished,” adding that Captain Kong Lae had approved the agreement reached with General Phoumi. He also described as “propaganda” accusations made in a broadcast over the *Pathet Lao* radio by Prince Souphanouvong (his half-brother and the *Pathet Lao* leader) that General Phoumi's group were “agents of American imperialism”; and declared that he accepted

assurances by the U.S. Ambassador and by the Siamese Government that both the United States and Siam regarded the present troubles as strictly an internal Laotian question.

On Aug. 25 Prince Souvanna Phouma broadcast an appeal to all *Pathet Lao* rebels to return to their homes and surrender their weapons, promising that they would not be punished; he also received a unanimous vote of confidence from the National Assembly (at a session attended by only 34 deputies). General Phoumi, however, denied in Savannakhet that he had agreed to form a coalition Government with the Prince, and there were reports of continuing military activity by the anti-revolutionary forces.

Despite his earlier denial General Phoumi flew to Luang Prabang on Aug. 28 with his principal supporters and 22 members of the National Assembly; Prince Souvanna Phouma, his Ministers, and 34 Assembly members also arrived in the royal capital on Aug. 29. The National Assembly met later in the day, after talks between the two leaders, and was formally notified of the resignation of the Somsanith Government; after King Savang Vatthana had accepted the resignation, Prince Souvanna was again officially invited by the King to form a new Government—thus re-enacting, with full legal forms, the procedure which had earlier been carried out at Vientiane.

Prince Souvanna announced his new Cabinet on Aug. 30, retaining the Defence and Foreign Affairs portfolios he had held previously and taking in addition that of Rural Affairs.

General Phoumi Nosavan became Deputy Premier and Minister of the Interior, Culture and Social Welfare. The other Ministers were: Nhouy Abhay—Education, Fine Arts, Sports and Youth; Leuam Insisiengmay—Economics; Inpeng Suryadhay—Finance; Quinim Pholsena—Education; Khamsouk Keola—Health; Touby Lyfoung—Justice; Kham Sing—Public Works and Planning. The Cabinet also included four Secretaries of State: General Ouan Rattikone—Defence; Khamking Souvanlasy—Foreign Affairs; Tiao Sisoumang—Rural Affairs; and Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak—Interior. The Cabinet thus comprised all eight members of Prince Souvanna's earlier administration (although with a number of changes in portfolios) together with five new members who had been Ministers in the outgoing Somsanith Government.

After the new Government's formation, General Phoumi declared that he considered the problem had now been “definitely settled,” that Captain Kong Lae had agreed with the settlement, and that he himself had full confidence in Captain Kong Lae.

Commenting on the surprising ease with which the latter, an unknown junior officer, had carried out his *coup* on Aug. 8-9, General Phoumi added he had himself entrusted the Captain with plans which he had made for the seizure of the capital during the events of December 1959-January 1960 [see 17248 A]; “Kong Lae carried out my plan point by point, but eight months later and on his own account.”

From Vientiane, however, it was reported on Aug. 31 that Captain Kong Lae had declared that he would “sooner die” than accept General Phoumi and the other members of the former Government. Prince Souvanna at once flew back to Vientiane, and on Sept. 1 Captain Kong Lae announced that he had withdrawn his opposition and now believed that General Phoumi and his

supporters would accept a neutralist policy. On the same day Prince Souvanna broadcast another appeal to the *Pathet Lao* to lay down their arms and invited their leaders to send emissaries to negotiate a permanent settlement, which could be reached “within three or four days.”

The new Government was sworn in on Sept. 2 at a Buddhist ceremony in Vientiane (as laid down by the Constitution), but neither General Phoumi nor Leuam Insiengmay had arrived in the capital and no official explanation of their absence was given. It was learned on Sept. 5, however, that General Phoumi had returned to his base at Savannakhet, where his radio announced that he did not intend to disband his counterrevolutionary committee until the situation in Vientiane had “returned to normal”—i.e., until Captain Kong Lae's parachute troops were withdrawn completely from the capital. The Prime Minister stated on Sept. 6 that he had ordered General Phoumi to come to the capital to take up his duties there, and that if he failed to do so he would be treated as a rebel.

The *Pathet Lao*'s reply to Prince Souvanna's offer of negotiations was broadcast by their radio on Sept. 5, listing the following four conditions as pre-requisites of any discussion: (i) immediate dismissal of all right-wing Ministers from the new Government; (ii) immediate ending of all fighting in Laos; (iii) release of all political prisoners held by the Government; (iv) a policy of strict neutrality, diplomatic recognition of all countries regardless of their form of government, and acceptance of unconditional aid from any country.

The special Criminal Court of Justice in Vientiane had on Sept. 3 dismissed the charges of treason previously brought against Prince Souphanouvong and other *Neo Lao Haksat* leaders, deciding that there was insufficient evidence to support them; Prince Souphanouvong and his colleagues had been arrested in July 1959, but their trial had been indefinitely postponed [see 17248 A] and they had escaped from custody in April last [see 17476 A].

A further move against Prince Souvanna's Government was made on Sept. 10, when Prince Boun Oum announced in a broadcast from Savannakhet that he had formed a new “revolutionary committee,” including General Phoumi Nosavan, and proclaimed martial law throughout the country; he asserted that since the new Government had been formed the country had been in a state of increasing tension, and that it had failed to resist *Pathet Lao* attacks against Royal Laotian Army posts in northern Laos. In Vientiane, the Prime Minister replied to this challenge by himself declaring a state of emergency and authorizing the Army to use force, if necessary, to restore order in the country. He also flew to Luang Prabang to see King Savang Vatthana, and on his return announced that the King had asked Prince Boun Oum to come to the royal capital for discussions and had agreed to the summoning of a conference there, to be attended by the Prime Minister, General Phoumi, and Prince Boun Oum.

The “revolutionary committee” in Savannakhet announced on Sept. 13 that it had accepted King Savang Vatthana's invitation to the proposed conference in Luang Prabang, while Prince Souvanna Phouma stated that he was sending two of his Ministers (Inpeng Suryadhay and Nhouy Abhay) and Tiao Somsanith to represent the Government. The two sides met the King on Sept. 14, but no statement was published. Subsequently, however, the Prime Minister announced that he had decided to ask the King to remove General Phoumi and Leuam Insiengmay from their ministerial posts in view of their refusal to take the oath of office, whilst the “revolutionary

committee” in Savannakhet announced the setting-up of a “temporary administrative committee.”

General Phoumi stated on Sept. 16 that as a result of renewed large-scale *Pathet Lao* activity in northern Laos the situation in Sam Neua province had become “critical.”

The General asserted that six battalions of rebels had entered the province from North Vietnam; that five more *Pathet Lao* battalions were being withdrawn from the Vientiane area “almost certainly” in order to join the rebel troops in Sam Neua and the other northern provinces of Phong Saly and Xieng Khouang; and that another battalion was in action in Thakhek province, between Savannakhet and Vientiane. [*Pathet Lao* activity in Sam Neua and Phong Saly had been the subject of a U.N. investigation in 1956—see 17174 A.]

Prince Souvanna Phouma admitted on Sept. 17 that normal communications with the town of Sam Neua had been cut by the *Pathet Lao* forces, adding that he believed they were attacking the town because the troops there were supporters of General Phoumi and not of his own Government. On the following day he said that the Government was sending ammunition by air to the Sam Neua garrison and would continue to send supplies as long as necessary.

The Savannakhet committee announced on Sept. 19 that its troops were preparing to “liberate” Vientiane, appealed to all police and soldiers in the capital to join forces with it, and warned the population to stay away from the vicinity of Government buildings. In the capital, Captain Kong Lae announced that he had resumed his active duties as commander of his parachute battalion, whilst a Government communique alleged that one of General Phoumi's officers was organizing a force of 1,000 Laotians and Siamese to attack Vientiane from the Siamese side of the Mekong River.

The first open clashes between the forces of the Government and of the “revolutionary committee” in Savannakhet took place near Paksane on Sept. 20; announcing this on the following day, the Prime Minister claimed that the committee's troops had been halted and that they had retired to Paksane itself. Prince Souvanna added that the King had been informed of the fighting and had at once summoned all military commanders to a conference in Luang Prabang; he himself had assured the King that the Government commanders would attend as soon as General Phoumi had agreed to do the same. The capture of Paksane by troops under Captain Kong Lae's command was announced on Sept. 22 by the Government, which also claimed that General Phoumi's force had lost 80 dead against only one soldier killed on the Government side; nevertheless, fears continued that General Phoumi would press forward his attack along the Mekong.

After several further requests by the King, General Phoumi and Prince Boun Oum eventually flew to Luang Prabang on Sept. 28, while a Government delegation led by General Rattikone also arrived in the royal capital. Prince Souvanna announced on the following day that both sides had agreed to a limited cease-fire and that General Phoumi had put forward a suggestion for a coalition government to be led by Prince Souvanna, Prince Boun Oum, and Prince Souphanouvong; the Prime Minister added that he would himself be prepared to consider any solution which might bring peace to the country. On Sept. 30, however, Captain Kong Lae

accused the Prime Minister of being “too soft” and said that his troops would continue their operations against General Phoumi's forces.

The change in General Phoumi's attitude towards negotiations was attributed to his rapidly weakening position, not only as a result of his military check at Paksane and of pressure from the King and Western diplomats [see below], but also since there were signs that the Siamese Government was modifying its attitude towards the Vientiane Government. In addition, Government parachute commando units had been dropped on Sept. 26 in the southern provinces, and the *Pathet Lao* forces were increasing their pressure on the garrison of Sam Neua.

While the talks were in progress in Luang Prabang on Sept. 28 General Phoumi's troops lost control of Sam Neua town, apparently to the *Pathet Lao* rebels. The circumstances of the capture of Sam Neua, however, were confused—Prince Souvanna stating that the troops involved were *Pathet Lao*, while Captain Kong Lae claimed that the victors were Government troops assisted by *Pathet Lao* units. On Oct. 1 the Prime Minister announced that he was sending two Ministers to Sam Neua to assert Government control over the town, and that a battalion of Government troops was also being moved into the province. Army headquarters in Vientiane stated on the following day that the last of the troops in the Sam Neua area who had been loyal to General Phoumi had come over to the Government side.

At a mass meeting organized by supporters of Captain Kong Lae in Vientiane on Oct. 4, Prince Souvanna announced that the Soviet Government had agreed to the opening of diplomatic relations at ambassadorial level, and also stated that he expected to open negotiations with the *Pathet Lao* leaders within a week; he added that he was not negotiating with the “revolutionary committee” at Savannakhet [although it was widely believed that the King himself would continue his efforts for a reconciliation]. Preliminary talks with a *Pathet Lao* delegation opened in Vientiane on Oct. 11, the Government being represented by General Rattikone and Quinim Pholsena.

Touby Lyfoung, who had also been appointed a Government delegate, had announced on Oct. 9 that the authorities in Xieng Khouang province, under his leadership, had decided to give their support to the Savannakhet committee, although he was prepared to visit Vientiane to discuss the situation with the Prime Minister.

It was reported on Oct. 26 that fighting had again broken out between Government forces and *Pathet Lao* rebels in the northern province of Phong Saly, following accusations by the central committee of *Neo Lao Haksat* that the Government troops had shelled pro-*Pathet Lao* villages on a number of occasions. The Army commander in the province, although nominally loyal to Prince Souvanna's Government, was known to be strongly opposed to the *Pathet Lao* and was regarded by left-wing opinion as a virtual supporter of General Phoumi.