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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

DATE: 20 Nov 1961
CLASS: Confidential Office
TIME: 10:30 a.m.

SUBJECT: Laos

PARTICIPANTS: Major General Phoumi Nosavan, Deputy Prime Minister of Laos and Minister of National Security and Veterans' Affairs
 Brigadier General Ouane Matrikoun, Chief of Staff of the Lao Armed Forces
 Sisonk Na Chompasak, Minister Attached to the Prime Minister's Office
 Manthonh Chantharasy, Chargé d'Affaires a.i., of the Embassy of Laos

U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary for Political Affairs
 Walter B. Rostow, Special Assistant to the President
 W. Averell Harriman, Ambassador at Large
 Walter P. McCaughy, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs
 Daniel V. Anderson, Director of Southeast Asian Affairs
 Richard E. Usher, Deputy Director of Southeast Asian Affairs
 Christian A. Chapman, Officer in Charge of Lao Affairs
 Edmund S. Glenn, Chief of Interpreting Branch
 Paul H. Nitze, Assistant Secretary of Defense
 Haydn Williams, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Regional Affairs
 Rear Admiral Luther C. Heintz, Director of Far East Region, Department of Defense

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Mr. Johnson opened the meeting by saying that he would like to hear the views of the Royal Lao Government on the International Control Commission and its powers. Mr. Johnson said that there were two aspects to this question: (1) the neutrality of the country and (2) control of infiltration by the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh. We would have to accept on our side certain limitations. The Communists have attacked the concept of control as an infringement of Lao sovereignty. However, we do not see how Laos can remain sovereign if it is not to be protected from infiltration. It has proven impossible to do this by military means and the need is to find an appropriate international mechanism. We are thus very happy to have the opportunity to hear General Phoumi and Ambassador Sisouk to reach a meeting of minds.

General Phoumi answered that they had always repeated that Laos should have a recognized and controlled neutral status. The RLG understands perfectly well that the other side wants to strengthen itself by weakening the ICC and by being free to introduce arms and personnel into Laos. In discussing at Zurich the joint communique on renouncing the protection of SEATO, which the other side desired, the RLG insisted on another paragraph providing for renouncing the protection of North Viet-Nam, the USSR, and Communist China. Consequently, the other two Princes went back to the formula found in the joint communique.

However, continued General Phoumi, is the question of controls not passed since the issuance of the communique? Everything (the cease-fire, ICC controls, and the Geneva Conference) depends on the problem of the formation of a government of national union. If the RLG succeeds in forming a government under the King with only a few Communist members, then there could be created controls, but only strict enough to prevent the Communist members from favoring Communist infiltration. If, on the other hand, they do not succeed in obtaining a majority in the Cabinet, then the Communists would be in the dominant position. General Phoumi hurried on to say, however, that they would never accept a Communist-dominated RLG.

Assuming that a satisfactory RLG was formed, Mr. Johnson asked, what are the General's views regarding the methods of controlling the borders of Laos?

General Phoumi answered that that was the reason he had said that controls were secondary to the formation of a government of

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national union. If this formation is based on the communique, the problem is brought back to its initial point of disagreement between the present RLG and the Pathet Lao. The Pathet Lao want a government of national union and so does the RLG. The two sides, however, give divergent meanings to this concept. There must therefore be an arbitration by the King. Such a government appointed by the King, the General said, cannot be against the RLG.

Mr. Johnson asked whether the King would accept this role and General Phoumi answered that before he had left for Nice, he had had a long conversation with the King. Phoumi said that he achieved exactly what he had then proposed to the King, and now he only needs to give him a satisfactory report.

General Phoumi said that even before leaving Vientiane, he knew that the Pathet Lao and Souvanna would insist on a Souvanna government, either broadened or under his sole leadership. Therefore, in order to avoid any discussions on this subject initially, he sought to force the other side to express its respect for the King and the Constitution.

At the request of General Phoumi, Ambassador Sisouk summarized the RLG's position. Sisouk said that it was believed in international public opinion that the RLG had made important concessions to Souvanna and Souphanouvong. However, the concessions were only apparent. One has to read the text of the communique which only provides for the internal and external policies of a provisional government as well as its immediate tasks. In fact, the government of national union is only provisional. The last sentence of the communique, providing that this government be formed by a special procedure bypassing the National Assembly and named by the King places the entire fate of the country in the hands of His Majesty. Thus the RLG preserved the better part of its interests. Souvanna's representative Quinim, commenting on the communique, has already violated its spirit. He insisted that the Souvanna government was legitimate and a government of national union could only be based on a broader Souvanna government. The communique, Sisouk said, however insists on the temporary character of this government.

Going back to the situation at the Geneva Conference, Sisouk then asked why did the Communists insist on inefficient controls, on saying that the ICC has sufficient powers and that larger

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powers would be an interference in the internal affairs of Laos. Sisouk referred to the Secretary of State's statement at the opening of the Conference, in which the Secretary said that the enemy always comes from the north. Sisouk pointed out that the areas controlled by the Pathet Lao and Souvanna were contiguous with North Viet-Nam. Laos, he said, is a test of Communist policy; they are trying to insert the "Troika" principle so as to weaken Laos and thus find a way to expand into Southeast Asia. Laos is to be used as a jumping-off point for aggression against South Viet-Nam, in particular. That is why the Communists oppose controls and guarantees and say that a simple declaration of neutrality suffices.

General Phoumi summarized the situation by stating that, in view of the unchanged position of the other side, the RLG was confronted by an "insoluble" problem. The enemy, he said, was determined not to give in on any point. This is the real conclusion of the Zurich communique. Now the RLG shall be confronted by the last test: Will the two Princes respect the King? If they do, there is a chance to achieve peace. Personally, Phoumi believes that such a solution is difficult and this is the reason why he insisted on consulting the United States Government to decide on the solution to be sought. Both at Ban Namone and Geneva, work is at a standstill. Everyone, he said, is waiting on the formation of a government of national union.

Mr. Johnson inquired whether it was anticipated that the King will wait for a recommendation from the three Princes or take the initiative himself to appoint a government.

Phoumi answered that he could not say precisely, since everything will depend on his report to the King. In this report, he envisages the personal action by His Majesty. He will suggest that the King call the two Princes to Luang Prabang and if they accept, there is a chance that the other side may take a less unbending position. For the King's initiative to be successful, he has come to Washington to seek great help from the United States, first, political and diplomatic support, and secondly, military support in the event that a purely "royal solution" does not succeed. To explain these two points Phoumi referred to the past. He said that the RLG had sought a peaceful settlement under bad circumstances. From the military point of view, they started negotiations at a time when they had suffered a number of setbacks. From the political point of view, it was a time when the USSR and

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Communist China showed determination to uphold the other side. Phoumi wants to reverse the situation. He wants clear and sufficient aid from the United States for the King's actions.

Mr. Johnson said that the crucial question was: What would be a satisfactory Royal Lao Government. We have spoken, he said, in general terms of an RLG not Communist-dominated but we would like to have the General's views of a tolerable solution, not an ideal one.

Phoumi answered that they had agreed on a formula of government of national union which included the participation of elements under Souvanna and Souphanouvong. However, they avoided detailed discussions of this question because they were faced by the determined position of the other side. The enemy wants not only Souvanna as Prime Minister but also two-thirds of the portfolios. Therefore, the RLG is undertaking a last effort to achieve a solution which can be acceptable to all three sides. The only such solution is one based entirely on royal action, since it is evident that the three sides cannot agree among themselves. However, he pointed out that there are risks if the royal formula is unacceptable. It means the end of all efforts.

Mr. Johnson then said that the Communists speak of three parties. He asked: Are there not in fact more than three political parties in Laos? Could they not be brought into the picture to strengthen the non-Communist side?

Phoumi agreed that there were more than three parties. The reason the RLG recognized three parties was for particular political reasons. At the beginning, the RLG did not want to condemn the Souvanna group which they considered salvageable. There are other tendencies in Laos. There are five political parties. The RLG placed His Excellency Phoui in the third seat at the Geneva Conference to demonstrate that the other two representatives were only political parties not on an equal footing with the RLG.

Mr. Johnson expressed great interest in Phoumi's statement that the Souvanna group was salvageable. He asked whether Phoumi felt progress had been made in this direction and how could it be strengthened.

In answer Phoumi said that they envisaged the royal solution because they could not agree that Souvanna is salvageable. Attempts

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to salvage him had been undertaken right at the beginning. After he had taken a plane to Phnom Penh, he had been invited to return to Vientiane with all honors. At that time Souvanna accepted many things. He agreed to remain in Phnom Penh and to mediate with the Pathet Lao. In the end he chose to make a trip around the world which placed him more on the other side. Souvanna, Phoumi said, is no longer salvageable.

In addition, Phoumi remarked, when Souvanna took the plane from Vientiane it was not to escape the RLG but rather to avoid arrest by Kong Le. Souvanna's change of heart after one week in Phnom Penh surprised them very much. Boun Oum had said that he was prepared to relinquish the Prime Ministership if Souvanna returned to Laos. Despite these offers, Souvanna decided to join the other side. At Zurich they had found him not himself. He used arguments that did not hold together. He spoke of his forces which in reality do not exist. Kong Le has been named General but he has less troops than when he was a Captain. Kong Le himself remains in the combined headquarters at Xieng Khouang, but he has no troops.

Mr. Rostow said that he would like to know the General's views on what he meant by political and military support from the US if the King's efforts fail.

Phoumi answered that there was talk to the effect that the RLG had been abandoned by the US. The other side visited Peking and Moscow, but even the Vice President did not try to go through Laos during his tour of Southeast Asia. Firmer support for the RLG from the US is required not only for international opinion, but also for the Pathet Lao. What troubled the RLG very much, Phoumi said, was the rumor that the US would even accept a formula of a government presided by Souvanna. "If this is true, it means that the US no longer has the same sentiments as in the past." With regard to military aid in the event of the failure of a royal solution - the two Princes refusing to participate in a government presided by the King - there is the possibility of a resumption of Pathet Lao attacks.

Mr. McConaughy remarked that it was important to clear up a discrepancy. He understood the General to say at one point that the Souvanna group might be salvageable and at another point that he was not salvageable.

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Phoumi answered that when it was decided to solve the Lao problem by peaceful means, the RLG had immediately thought of retrieving Souvanna and his group, although the group is not very important. However, the RLG arrived at a point when it was forced to recognize that Souvanna's attitude showed that he was no longer salvageable. That point was his return to Xieng Khouang where he commanded the Pathet Lao and Kong Le troops to attack Luang Prabang and Vientiane. (Phoumi then added rather uncearly that the point was rather after Souvanna's going to Communist China.)

Sisouk then said there were many rumors at Geneva regarding disagreements between the Pathet Lao and Kong Le forces. Souvanna had spoken to him and to a number of delegations openly on this subject. Souvanna's statements made the RLG even more suspicious of him. "If a husband and wife," Sisouk said, "have disagreements, they do not talk about it with others." The RLG will want to examine the situation further. The RLG is seeking to find if there is really disagreement between Souvanna and the Pathet Lao. Up to now at Geneva and at Ban Namone, the representatives of Souvanna have taken exactly the Pathet Lao positions.

Mr. Anderson asked how the General envisaged military aid in the future in the light of Paragraph II - 3 of the communique prohibiting the entry of foreign personnel in Laos. How does the General envisage the training of the FAL in the future?

Phoumi answered that they had expressed their views on the value of the communique; it was only a piece of paper to satisfy the other side in order to get an agreement on the formula providing for an expression of respect for the Constitution and the King. The policy of a new government would be up to that government. He admitted that there was a possibility of a government of national union which would include the three Princes and which would, therefore, be forced to follow the policies set forth in the communique. However, such a government was only provisional and would remain in power only long enough to return the situation to normal.

Ambassador Harriman asked whether he had given any thought to elections. What period of time did he think necessary to return the situation to normal? How would the RLG come out of such an election?

Phoumi replied

Phoumi replied that the other side had proposed dissolution of the National Assembly first, to be followed by formation of a government of national union. The RLG had succeeded in obtaining agreement from the two Princes to the reverse procedure. Elections depended on the new government. If the government is supported by the Assembly, then there would be no need for general elections. However, without exact knowledge of the position of the US, the King will not make a decision.