

SEATU
RECORD

HANOI'S ROLE IN LAOS

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As the fighting in Laos between North and South Vietnamese forces entered its fourth week, the Soviet Union continued to block efforts to restore Laotian neutrality through the machinery of the 1962 Geneva Conference, of which it is a Co-Chairman (with Britain). The Soviet Foreign Minister refused a British request for the joint circulation of an appeal for the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from Laos, addressed to Moscow and London on February 5 by the Laotian Prime Minister. In his letter, circulated by Britain alone on March 4, Prince Souvanna Phouma said that Hanoi's intention was to "occupy and enslave" his country. Protesting against the growing menace from Hanoi, he again demanded the withdrawal of all North Vietnamese forces. But while noting their activity along the Ho Chi Minh trail, he expressed greater concern about their attacks in January and February on government-held towns and garrisons. They had captured Muong Phalane and Muong Soui (a garrison of neutralist forces) and subsequently taken four of the six military positions which protected Luang Prabang, threatening the royal capital itself. A government communiqué on February 8 deplored the incursion of South Vietnamese troops across Laotian borders, but said that the "primary responsibility" lay with North Vietnam which was continuing to violate the neutrality and territorial integrity of Laos. It called for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops.

A bizarre feature of the fighting has been Hanoi's insistence that the Communist forces under attack in Southern Laos are the local Pathet Lao and Patriotic Neutralists, and its rejection of American allegations about a North Vietnamese presence—though the US negotiator at the Paris talks noted on February 25 that Hanoi no longer actually denied the presence of its troops. The fiction is maintained in the face of overwhelming evidence, including prisoners of war and deserters, that there are at least six North Vietnamese regiments (12,000 men) in the immediate area of the fighting.

By its construction and use of the Ho Chi Minh trail through Southern Laos, Hanoi has virtually treated the area as occupied territory, developing an interlocking network

there for heavy and sustained lorry traffic in support of its operations in South Vietnam and Cambodia. The Laotian Government estimates that approximately 40,000 North Vietnamese troops are involved in maintaining and protecting this network, through which thousands of North Vietnamese recruits have been infiltrated southwards. The area became critically important to Hanoi as a means of resupplying and maintaining North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia and South Vietnam after it had been denied the use of Kompong Som port following Prince Sihanouk's deposition. In recent months the North Vietnamese have added more roads of better quality to the existing network and strengthened the defence system along the trail against ground and air attack. A massive supply operation, possibly the most ambitious yet, was launched at the onset of the dry season in November, 1970.

It was to disrupt this operation and make the infiltration routes unusable that the South Vietnamese Government ordered its army to invade Laos on February 8. President Thieu reiterated that it had no territorial ambitions in Laos and that the army would withdraw completely after its task there was accomplished. The decision received virtually unanimous support from Saigon politicians.

Communist reports of Saigon's move have alleged that United States ground troops were taking part. Yet though Hanoi evidently hoped to arouse American public opinion in its favour by addressing various appeals to the American people over the heads of their government (including a letter from the Pathet Lao leader, Prince Souphannouvong), there has been little reaction in the United States. For domestic consumption, messages of support from other Communist countries were widely publicised in North Vietnam as were any signs of protest in South Vietnam or the West.