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Souvanna Phouma, Prince of Laos, 1901-1984

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Address by Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma

to National Assembly

Vientiane, May 30, 1968

Deputies:

At a time when the National Assembly is resuming its work, the Government desires to submit for your examination, possibly for your criticism, the balance sheet of activity which it has carried out in the midst of difficulties which you well know since they affect the very life of the majority of your districts. Moreover, the Government is thereby responding to the wish of the people, who want to know periodically about the state of the nation. Where, better than here and at this time, should the dialogue between the representatives of the people and the Government take place?

Our difficulties, need I say, stem from the war. For years we have suffered a foreign aggression. The government of Hanoi, betraying international opinion and repudiating its signature, has violated all the Accords it has signed in order to intervene in our internal affairs and support a rebellion which was insignificant at its origin and which, even today, would not amount to much if North Vietnam were not helping it militarily. Politically speaking, the Neolachaksat is not a national movement. It owes its survival only to the battalions of the government of Hanoi.

Our difficulties are therefore created, amplified, maintained by this aggression and this subversion which impose on us, the crushing burden of an army of more than 60,000 men, among the youngest, the most able-bodied of our people, drawn from our cities and mainly from our countryside, away from their family fields which, without them, are inevitably jeopardized. This situation has brought us to date a flood of nearly 600,000 refugees who have left Red zones, abandoning everything to flee the dictatorship of the Neolachaksat. It has also turned our country into an active transit route for North Vietnamese troops going to South Vietnam. . . All that has not prevented North Vietnam from stating recently, and

the Neolaohaksat immediately afterward, that our affirmations are false and deceitful. North Vietnam denies the evidence. It wants to ignore the prisoners, the ralliers, the uniformed dead, the reports of the International Commission, the HO CHI MINH road, the statements of thousands of refugees. It denies everything outright to camouflage its aggression and to safeguard the communist truth.

Deputies, it is in these conditions that the Government has worked for years, and you know it better than anyone. Moreover, while I expect the inevitable criticisms which are the normal exercise of Parliament's prerogatives, nothing can prevent me from thinking that in this Assembly, the President of which was for a long time, and in very difficult moments, too, a man at grips with the obstacles of the Executive, nothing can prevent me from thinking that basically we all have an identical view of the problems faced by any government in these exceptional circumstances. The word miracle is a prophet's word. It is also a gambler's word. It is not the word of a chief of government. We must consider the affairs of state, i.e., human things, seriously and with objectivity.

Our whole national problem is, first, to resist foreign aggression by every means. That's what we are doing. Secondly, to develop our economy at the same time, with the aid of our foreign friends, according to a plan prudently established by our ministries and in which priority choices must be made because one cannot have everything and do everything at once.

Thus we have striven to develop what can be developed first in this essentially agricultural country in order to preserve our currency and to assure the subsistence of our people. Rice is the basic food. Formerly we used to export it. Today, because the Neolaohaksat and its friends are ravaging our countryside, we must import it. That's how they conceive a prosperous Laos. Nevertheless, we are doing the necessary to find a solution to this number one problem. We have, therefore, studied with our foreign friends the possibility of a double annual harvest. The tests are very

encouraging. Thanks to careful irrigation, selection of vigorous and special varieties, advice of very competent experts, we have been able to increase pilot plots from 300 hectares to 1,400 hectares in two years. This experience is full of promise. We are going to apply it on a vast scale in all possible areas of the Kingdom. But let me draw your attention to the fact that agriculture is not an easy question, that it is more dependent on the weather than any other industry, that it demands the adhesion of peasants which is not always easy, etc., in brief, one must be patient in this field.

Rice is not the only resource of the Lao soil. Our forests furnish good wood. Demand is increasing. Without losing sight of the protection of our forest patrimony, we sold during 1967-68 more than a million U.S. dollars worth of wood. Other products will soon be processed on the spot thanks to friendly aid. Cotton, for example, which is found practically everywhere in Laos, will now be somewhat industrialized. This will be the beginning of a small industrialization in this field which promises much and which will supplement all that is being done and is planned on the pilot experimental farms, where excellent results have already been obtained. Diversification of our agricultural and forest products, that is the program under way which must occupy successive governments for many years.

Agriculture, however, cannot be satisfied with only the work of man in our era; we must help the peasant master water in all its forms. We must also help him direct this water. In brief, it is necessary that another concentrated and positive force be added to the endeavors of man. The dam at Nam Ngum will be this powerful force. This is certainly something which cannot be accomplished overnight. But it is entering into a more rapid pace. The planning has taken place. In a few years the dam will permit the irrigation of vast areas. The electrical energy which it will provide will be spread to the countryside, it will even go to a neighboring country and friend to help its development, showing at the same time, peaceful

communal nature of our works and projects. We have other works in progress, and other projects, for example, a cement factory in the region of Thalat. A study is in progress. For example, the construction of modern slaughterhouses in Vientiane, Savannakhet, Pakse, from which will come shipments of clean, wholesome meat for internal and external consumption. But, for example, construction of the central hydroelectric plant at Salabam and in the near future in Kioumuok, etc.

May I refer also to the construction and opening of the new high school in Luang Prabang. May I also say that one will be constructed in Pakse next year and that we have modernized the school of medicine and the Institute of Lao and Civil Administration, laid the foundation for a new Ministry of Education building and enrolled more and more students into our schools. Need I remind you of our recent assumption of control of the Operation Brotherhood Hospital staffs, the construction of a new hospital at Vang Vieng, the modernization of the one at Paksane, the construction of a military hospital at Vientiane and a new operating room at the hospital at Luang Prabang? Need I call to your attention the construction completed on National Highway 13, the improvement of the streets in Vientiane, in Luang Prabang and in other provinces, the building of information centers and the building for the national radio station in Vientiane?

Perhaps I should also speak of the reorganization of the Ministry of Defense, the training of Government officials for a future role in civil defense, the replanting of our forests, assistance to refugees and disabled veterans. But I think this would go beyond the purpose of this speech. If the Assembly desires it, a general debate can be held at which the ministries of the Royal Government will bring to you all the necessary clarifications.

But before concluding I want to touch on an important point concerning which I know you are very concerned. It has to do with the financial question. The Ministry of Finance has wrestled

with an extremely complex and difficult situation. Complex and difficult because even though we are masters of our own receipts and expenditures, economic facts do not always obey legislative or executive branches of governments. The recent fluctuations on the gold market in Laos are, for example, strong proof of this. The causes are multiple, beyond our control, subject to capricious rules of fear, confidence and interest. Thus, one of our principal sources of income will not reach our expectations this year. The dominating fact is that given the war which prevents foreign and internal investments because capital never ventures into an uncertain situation, we can only limit our goals and try to hold down prices avoiding inflation, extraordinary expenditures and reducing as much as possible public spending. This is the basic financial problem of Laos. We cannot hope to produce, that is to say, gain a national income when out of three million inhabitants, there are only seven or eight hundred thousand in a position to exploit the resources of this vast land, a good part of whom, moreover, are taken up with other economically unproductive tasks such as war, administration, police, subversion, etc. Only peace can bring production, investments, the creation of jobs, foreign capital, in brief, prosperity to this country. I submit to your attention these basic facts of the financial problem which is by the way in general the analysis of the International Monetary Fund, which recommends partial remedies while recognizing the important progress realized by our Ministry of Finance in the stabilization program.

Gentlemen, I venture to say that the balance of the conduct of administration is positive. The Government has striven to the best of its ability to defend the national territory to assure a continuity and a stability now more necessary than ever before.

We have tried to present to the nations which have demonstrated a sympathy for the Kingdom the appearance of a responsible people in the face of foreign aggression, subversion and a series of unforeseen natural disasters. At the United Nations, in Australia,

in Japan, and other countries, we have defended the cause of the Lao nation and we can say without boasting that our pleas have been understood and these countries have aided us in all possible ways. Meanwhile, the Lao question is far from being resolved. You have followed the conversations in Paris. They are extremely difficult. The government of Hanoi pretends to consider the Lao question as one unrelated to the events in Vietnam despite the fact that it, totally against our wishes, is all part of the same problem, since there are North Vietnamese troops in Laos supporting the Neolaothaksat. We must wait until reason and good sense clarify these arguments. We will make known our view when it is necessary. While waiting, in the face of the grave dangers which still menace us, we must think of our sacred national unity and not of minor or petty quarrels. Our august and venerable sovereign has recalled this to us several times already as respectful sons, Let us obey the will of the father of our nation.