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Speech by Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma. 1967-11-02

Souvanna Phouma, Prince of Laos, 1901-1984

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF LAOS,
PHOUKE SOUVANNA PHOUA,
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA.

2nd November 1967

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Mr. Prime Minister, I am touched to speak today before this gathering of people from the Australian Parliament - people who have such a deep knowledge of international politics. I am really touched by the praise which has been made by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition Mr. Whitlam.

All my actions in the present and the past have been uniquely aimed at letting my country survive in its independence and its neutrality. As I have said on several occasions Laos has been at war for more than 20 years. As I have said before for Laos a greatly under-populated country, this is a great thing. We are three million inside and there are more than 16 million outside. All that is in the past; the present means to us that we have to make available more than half of our annual budget for our defence. That's why we have more than a hundred thousand Laotians under arms.

In the recent history of our relationship, this is the first time that a Laotian Prime Minister has paid a visit to your country. I feel this honour very deeply, and so does our nation. Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, the warm regards I address you in the name of my people are full of gratitude and friendship.

How could it be else. The relationship between our governments is excellent. You know our difficulties, and as friends you help us to solve them, taking as friends your share of our troubles. In Laos, Australia is rightly known as a dynamic, prosperous country, in a stage of full economic development. We are also pleased to know that today she has the feeling of belonging to that great entity of South East Asia, where changes, mutations and dangers retain her attention particularly. In these conditions, the understanding and collaboration between our two countries are natural. But, in all truth, I have to say that in our exchanges your share is by far the more important and generous.

However, Ladies and Gentlemen, Laos does not find the same understanding everywhere. I want to speak of our "forgotten war" - and of its consequences. Many think that the situation is not so drastic, that we exaggerate our troubles. In fact we are the victims of a certain literary romanticism. The country where it is good to live, one calls our old kingdom, a country where time flows slowly, in a quiet and musical non-chalance. Maybe Laos was so, in some periods of our history, when we were not under attack by our neighbours. But for at least twenty-two years, it has not been so at all. Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to illustrate this period by some testimony, for whose sometimes personal nature I ask you to excuse me. But this testimony belongs in effect to the history of our country, and therefore to the history of South East Asia which is now at stake. Let us go back to 1945 - Japan ended the status of the French Protectorate, established in Laos for more than half a century. We suddenly faced a worrying change and a great void. However, the Lao

patriots seized the opportunity to recover their independence and to reunify their country. As you know, Laos was artificially divided into two parts. On the one hand, in the north the Kingdom of Luang Prabang and its Provinces, where the Court and the Royal ministries are located; on the other the rest of the country was under the administration of the French governors.

So that the patriots, united into the independence movement, the Lao Issara (which means Free Laos), quickly created a Government. The members were, including myself and other Lao Nationalists, Prince Phetsarath, my elder brother, our leader and Prince Souphanouvong, my younger brother, at present leader of the Neo Lao Haksat, a party of Communist persuasion. However, the French came back in strength in 1946, and we were obliged to take refuge in Thailand where we continued our struggle with, alas, almost no means. Our only strength was our hope, and the possibility of a reasonable solution at the hands of our former colonizers.

Souphanouvong did not view the events the same way we did. He was very influenced by his Vietminh friends. Slowly he fell completely beneath their control. He shared their idea of a merciless, armed struggle. In fact the dissension became such that our Government, weary of the servitude accepted by Souphanouvong decided to oust him in May, 1949. His destiny was henceforth sealed: he became a creature of the North Vietnamese.

During that troubled year, we had been told that the French Government was thinking of a political change for the former Protectorate. Reference was made to a special autonomy. To know exactly what was envisaged, our Government sent me to Paris, where I was notified of the French proposals, which became the subject of the Franco-Lao Treaty, signed in Paris in July, 1949. The contents of that Treaty, examined by our Government when I returned to Bangkok, seemed honourable and acceptable in the existing circumstances.

Our objectives being achieved, the LAO ISSARA movement had no further reason to exist. It was dissolved. Most of its members returned to Laos. For personal reasons, Prince Phetsarath stayed in Thailand. As for my brother Souphanouvong, a slave to his convictions and to the organisation to which he had adhered, he resumed the fight against France..... and his country. However, the following year, in 1950, a new and important political fact appeared. Two personalities of the Lao Issara movement including myself, were members of the Royal Government. It was decided that general elections should take place in 1951. We were loyally applying the principles of our liberal democracy, which allows all opinions.

The vote being favourable to our party, the Lao Cao Na (which means the Progress Party), I was asked to lead the Government. As for Souphanouvong and his friends, helped by the Vietminh, they kept on fighting the French and the Lao. The Vietminh menaced our country seriously for three years. In 1953, Luang Prabang, the Royal and religious capital, was in danger. Thakhek in the south, was seized by the Vietminh. In France, at the same time, the political conception of the French Union was undergoing a notable change. The independence of the Associated States was conceived on another basis. Thus, in 1953, by the Franco-Lao

Treaty, France decided to give Laos complete independence. This Treaty is notable for never having been ratified by the French Parliament because of its conflict with the French Constitution. However, so far as Laos is concerned, all the special links with France disappeared. Independence was complete, as complete as the most intransigent of our nationalists could hope.

However, events were moving to a crisis. In 1954, the battle of Dien Bien Phu ended finally the Indochina war. In Geneva, the belligerents and the countries concerned in this tragedy met in conference. The Pathet Lao, and I point it out to indicate its servitude to the Vietminh, was represented by North Vietnam, which confirmed what we had always maintained that, without its North Vietnamese allies, the Pathet Lao would be nothing.

Now we were on the threshold of peace. However, I could only conceive of peace in Laos on the basis of national reconciliation. We should not perpetuate a civil war, for the profit only of foreigners. As regards the future policy of our young nation, the idea of neutrality seemed to me the best formula. Constantly I tried to bring my compatriots to accept this concept, which however met several obstacles.

Nevertheless, in 1957, we succeeded in creating a Government of National Union, which could keep going only with the greatest difficulty. The Government of the United States of America was not inclined to favour the presence of the Pathet Lao inside the Royal Government. Pressure reached the point where I had to resign in 1958, leaving a situation that deteriorated rapidly, as was easy to forecast.

In the event, after spectacular failures, the way I had shown had to be resumed. Experience proves more and more that, for such a fragile Kingdom, lying where it does because of geography and the history of its people, the only way is the adoption of a policy of strict neutrality and non-commitment.

Therefore, in 1960, after the tragic events that you may remember, I came back into power. The following year, a second Conference was held in Geneva, for the problem of Laos alone. Fourteen nations were present. Finally in July 1962 the Statute of Neutrality for the Kingdom was agreed and guaranteed by the thirteen other nations participating in the Conference.

We were fully satisfied with the Geneva Accords. We thought that the nightmare of internal subversion and foreign aggression was over. But, alas, our people were grievously deceived. The Accords were immediately and shamelessly violated. The Neo Lao Haksat (the political party) crushed by the Pathet Lao after the formation of the Government of National Union in 1957, valet of the Hanoi Government, continued its sabotage. The war, instead of stopping, grew more intense. Today, five years after the signature of the Geneva Accords, we can count about 40,000 North Vietnamese soldiers on our territory. They are fighting beside 15,000 Pathet Lao, armed, paid, trained and encadred by North Vietnam. The development of our country is paralyzed. Thousands of refugees stream into the Governmental zones. Hundreds of villages are abandoned. Only half of the soil is cultivated. The Ho-Chi-Minh trail has become an active transit route for North Vietnamese forces.

This Ladies and Gentlemen, is the real picture of our country. It must be admitted that it does not exactly correspond with the picture painted by writers of a quiet care-free country, preoccupied by festivals and music. For a country of three million inhabitants with peaceful customs, this is the greatest tragedy of its history.

But, the most distressing aspect is to think that this useless, bloody, tragedy could not have occurred if some ideological, greedy nations had not come and interfered directly or indirectly in our internal affairs. By what right, what moral, do they assume the right to liberate us?

Truly, we are still subject to the reign of force in relationships between nations. So much the worse for the weak. The deception of the small nations is growing day by day. For our part bitterness is deep in our people, who only desire peace and tranquility, the respect of their frontiers and of their sovereignty.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am sorry to have been so long. But, for the outside world, I will repeat our plaint without end, for, to put it briefly, this problem of peace and war concerns us all.

Finally, I would like to say again that our people are happy to be able to count on solid, sincere friendship like that of Australia. Respect for liberty, respect for man, solidarity between peoples, these are the qualities we like in you, for they are sincere, friendly and human.

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