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Transcript of the Reception between Vice Premier Chen Yi and the Delegation from Laos

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Summary:

Chen Yi and Sisana Sisane discuss the Civil War in Laos and the various attempts to mediate the conflict by outside powers, including China, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

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Transcript of the Reception between Vice Premier CHEN Yi and the Delegation from Laos

Time: 8:00pm, February 10th, 1961

Transcriptionists: GU Cui, ZI Zhongyun

Sisana Sisane: I am very happy to have this opportunity to come before Your Excellency; to [also] convey to Your Excellency respectful greetings from Prince Phouma; [and] to [also] salute you on behalf of the Laos Peace Commission.

[Vice Premier] CHEN [Yi]: Thank you. I represent the State Council in welcoming you (plural). Your country is currently undergoing a civil war [which is] now the world's problem. The whole world is [now] paying attention [to it]. [As you are] the front line of anti-Americanism, [it is only right that] we should welcome you. A people [who] have not suffered struggle are not known by [the rest of] humanity. [Now that you are] struggling, everyone knows Laos. In the past, this was also true for China. China is relatively big, [of course] everyone knows [China] but they looked down [on us]. Through [witnessing] our resistance against America [and] against JIANG Jieshi [Chiang Kai-shek], people's attitude towards us changed. Forty years ago, after World War One, I was a youth on my first trip to France. People looked down [upon me]. People asked me how such a big country could be bullied by a [place as] small [as] Japan. I had not an answer [to give them]. You have gone through battle. [You have] shed blood [and] made sacrifices. [This has] improved your international standing [and it is therefore that] we pay our tribute to the heroes of the Lao People.

Sisana Sisane: Over the past fifteen years we have been struggling. Of course, [we have been able to do this because of the] bravery of the People of Laos. [We also have] received support from people around the world. [We have] especially [received support from] China and Vietnam. Therefore [it can be said that] if the people of Laos achieve victory it is our common victory.

[Vice Premier] CHEN [Yi]: [You are] quite correct. We ought to provide assistance [to you]. [This is] a matter [where we] ought to [provide assistance] but [we] have done very little for you. When I arrived in Kunming after coming back from Myanmar, I saw your Minister of Health, Khamsouk Keola, and Phongsavan Pheng, the Chairman of the Neutral Peace Committee. [We were all] quite happy. Happy that you were able to coordinate with us at the special session of the Cairo Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Council. We should cooperate and coordinate with each other.

Sisana Sisane: To tell the truth, the Chinese delegation provided us with a lot of support. [Without that support it wouldn't have been possible] to achieve a victory like this [or to] have the current kind of resolution.

[Vice Premier] CHEN [Yi]: It was [achieved via] everyone's efforts. Tomorrow, some friends from Beijing would like for you to [give them an] introduction to some of the things which happened. For now, [let's] not talk in too much detail. Currently, there are two observations [I would like to make which I would] appreciate [if] you [could] pass on to Prince Souphannavong, Quinim Pholsena, and Captain Kong Le.

The first point is one which we have [already] discussed with the Soviet Union [and our] Vietnamese friends. We [are] all of the same opinion. [There are two possible] solutions to the Laos problem: one is working it out through International Conference and the other is relying on the struggle of the Lao Patriotic Front forces to clear the front situation and develop themselves. We feel it is of the utmost importance to rely on front line battles to clear the situation. [Solving this will] determine victory in Laos.

The International Conference is a diplomatic struggle, a political struggle, it can only be placed in a subordinate position [to armed struggle]. To say it more simply, of armed struggle and diplomatic struggle, which is of the utmost importance? [With regards to] solving the Laos Problem, we feel that armed struggle is most important. Do you understand [what I] mean? (Both men nod)

Because the International Conference, or the Geneva Conference, or Sihanouk's Proposed Fourteen Nations' Conference, or the India-chaired International Control Commission--also participated by Canada and Poland-- are all just political struggles, there are just quarrels. [They] cannot solve the Laos Problem. At any international conference, [there] always are two factions: Socialist countries and genuinely peace-loving neutral countries [are on] one side. Western countries, aggressive [countries], and [those countries that] interfere in Laos's internal affairs [are] another side. These two compete against each other. Both Phoumi [Nosavan]'s reactionary group and the legitimate government of Laos must attend, [how can they] not argue? [This] cannot solve [Laos'] problem. Solving [the] problem depends on [a] victory [at the] front line. The faster strength is developed, the faster the problem is solved. With regards to the International Conferences, [we all have] differing opinions. The Soviet Union, ourselves [China], Vietnam, and the Lao Patriotic Front are unanimously of one opinion. America, England, [and] India [are of a] differing opinion. Within [their own side they] also have differences of opinion. Therefore, it is difficult to convene any international conference. This is a great opportunity to develop, to become self-sufficient [and] strong, to create favorable conditions [such that] even if future negotiations [take place] it will not be detrimental. [In] our war of Liberation against JIANG Jieshi, [we took part in] negotiations [while also] fighting. The Americans are completely at JIANG Jieshi's side against us. [The] more victories [the] front line [achieves], the better the negotiators will be able to achieve [their goals]. [At that time] Premier Zhou Enlai was representing [us as a] negotiator [and] I was fighting on the front lines. Our victories on the front lines supported the negotiators [and gave] strength [to their words]. JIANG Jieshi's front line failed bit by bit, his negotiators [words were like] vapor without strength [behind them]. Therefore, it did not matter whether or not an international conference [took place] as [we had already proved our] strength with victories on the front line. Waiting for a negotiated settlement is very dangerous. It is disadvantageous for the people of Laos. When [I was in] Kunming, the Chairman of the Laos Neutral Peace Committee, Phongsavan Pheng, [said to me that] he estimated that the international conference would soon convene. I said no. Phoumi's rebel groups still attack and weaken you. [You must] first strengthen your own position before discussing. You also must attack them, recover some positions, and strengthen yourself. Convening a conference too early is unrealistic. To decisively solve Laos's problems, [you must first focus] on developing your strength [and] expanding your [territory].

My friends, [let me] give both of you an example—the Korean War. On our side [we had the] Korean People's Army [and] the Chinese [People's] Volunteer Army. On their side [they had] the US led sixteen-nation forces of the UN, and South Korea. A total of 1,000,000 [troops]. The American aggressors [alone fielded an] army of 400,000. We had maybe 400,000 or 500,000 [troops]. The Korean People's Army had [another] 300,000. The two sides fought for 3 years, negotiations took place for more than two years, fighting happened again for more than two years. One side negotiating, one side fighting. In the middle of both sides' war zone [a line was] drawn [and a location picked] for negotiations. Every day [at the table in Panmunjom] negotiations [took place] to the sound of explosions. [When the] United States was defeated, they immediately [returned to] negotiations with a changed attitude. [When] they [still] thought that there was hope at the front line [they did not want to] negotiate. Why would [they agree] to a truce? [It is only] because at the Battle of Triangle Hill (Operation Showdown) the enemy's attack was broken. America knew there is no way to break through the Armistice Line (Military Demarcation Line) so [they must] accept a truce. In the end an agreement [was reached] and the anti-American war in Korea was concluded due to a victory at the front line. [For] you [in] Indochina, [it is] also the same. After the victory of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, the Geneva agreement was

reached. The north/south war (Vietnam War) fighting ended. [The] Armistice Agreement was signed in Geneva but the decision was the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. I cite these examples [for] illustrative [purposes]. Lao's problems should be solved primarily via armed struggle. This is in the [best] interest of the Lao People and the most important way to secure the fate of the nation.

People might ask, why should the Soviet Union propose convening an international conference? [Why] should the Soviet Union, China, [and] Vietnam support Sihanouk's proposal? The reasoning is not simple. Supporting any [and all] international conferences will not hinder your [chance at] victory, but instead will protect your victory, expose the imperialists, attack Boun Oum's group, [and] halt [the] war's expansion. Convening the international conference [is a] future possibility. Currently the imperialists don't want to convene any kind of international conference, they look to the illusions [spread by] Kennedy. This is wrong. Now they want to open one part. [One] can predict, if you [manage to] consolidate Phongsali, Xam Neua, Xiengkhouang and the Plain of Jars, [and then] achieve some victories, it will [make things complicated for] [trans. note—literally, the imperialists hands will be busy and their feet will be disordered] the imperialists [and] they will immediately [want to] convene an international conference. [It is] like this with the imperialist reactionaries, in order to achieve a truce we must not completely refuse [them]. For example [in] North Korea, [even though] we were winning, we could not reject a ceasefire; also in Vietnam, we could not use the Battle of Dien Bien Phu as a reason to reject signing the armistice. The people of the world [along with] public opinion always [are] hoping for a peaceful solution. Revolutionaries always cannot completely reject peaceful solutions to problems. But it is also difficult to absolutely say. If [there comes] a time [that you] achieve a great victory [and many positive] developments, Phoumi's rebel group [will have] suffered great losses. That time [is the time when] you can consider [the necessity of] convening an international conference. You make the decisions. This is [my] estimation [of things]. The main [point I] want [to] explain [to you is that] when international conferences are favorable to the imperialists [then] they will want to hold them. And they will take advantage of the conference to reach an agreement or somehow to confine you. [Therefore] you should take advantage of current beneficial opportunities, and develop weaponry, mobilize the masses, this is the most important, waiting for any kind of international conference is an illusion, [and all of those who accept this illusion] must suffer the consequences. This is the first point I want to discuss.

The second point: you have to strive for large scale development and front line victory [if you are to achieve] a favorable situation [or] even to reunify Laos. Here [let me] bring up an [example of one way by which you can] attack the problem. I am a soldier. This area [is something I know well]: Boun Oum and Phoumi's group has about 30 battalions for a total of around 38,000 people. Thailand [also] has an associated group of reactionaries [but they are] few in number. It is said that Ngô Đình Diệm has a battalion [that can join with them] and go to Laos. [On] your side the legitimate government has combat troops [numbering] 7,000 people, as well as 4,000 guerrillas for a total of 11,000 people. Now [we] compare and contrast [the two sides], whose side is larger, whose side is smaller. By the numbers, the reactionaries [have more people]. They have about 40,000 people. You are [only] 1/4th of their amount. But they're politics are reactionary, [they] cannot mobilize the people, [they are] isolated], [and the] quality of their armies is poor. You are patriotic, justice [loving], supported by the people, [and your] army is high quality. [The] reactionaries win because of their numbers, [but] your victories are [because of your] quality. This is the matter. Their equipment also may be better than yours. Owing to [help from] the Soviet Union, China, [and] Vietnam, your equipment also has improved. (Portion Not Declassified) But [you] also [have to] admit, his equipment [is] still better than your's [is]. Thirdly, they are fighting for the Americans and suffer the opposition of the people [while] you are fighting for yourselves [and] have the support of the people. The whole world's people sympathize with your side. Even though they have 30 battalions, [at] the first line of offense [there are] only 13 battalions. Your situation [is such that] we cannot be 100% clear, [it seems that you will be able to field]

approximately 6 battalions. From analyzing the [differences in] strength between ourselves and the enemy, [it would seem that] you have now developed sufficient strength to break up the reactionary party and [emerge] victorious. Therefore [bringing up] the problems your front line [might suffer], is [your] equipment insufficiently [good]? This is not the main problem. Are your troops too few? Not the main problem. Troops can be developed further, but [this is] not the main issue. Is [the main issue] reliance on foreign troops and aid? Also not the problem. We can turn this around and make the problem clearer: Boun Oum's reactionary group has 30,000 soldiers, [they] also have American [and] Thai support. But you [still] have no solution, the problem [as we] can see it is not numbers, [it is] equipment and foreign aid. They have it but you [are still in need] of greater development. So, the question is, how do you put your main force of 7,000 troops and 4,000 guerrillas to best use. To use a popular Chinese phrase, [you must figure out] how to form a fist. The five fingers when apart have no strength. Folded together [and formed into a fist] they are powerful. [When I was] in my home in Beijing looking at this issue, I thought that organizing between 5000 and 6000 troops would be [enough] to completely change this situation. [With] recently [acquired] information [about the enemy it can be seen that] they have one army made up of five battalions attacking north of Vientiane. The other four battalions are attacking southward from Luang Prabang. There are also four battalions in the east moving to the west. The enemy has divided [his troops] into three armies. Your main force has 7,000 people. If the resistance splits into three armies, no one army will be strong compared to them. This cannot solve the problem. War is just about fighting. They cannot destroy you. You also cannot destroy them. Therefore the focus of the second question is "how to [best] attack?" How to use military force? This plays a decisive role in the development of [your strength. You] can imagine, the enemy has three armies coming [at you] one of which is comparatively weak. If one of [the enemy's] armies has two [or] three battalions, you can [send an army with] four or five battalions to attack that weaker army. Absolutely, [you will be] able to win. [If] your main force has four or five battalions attacking [the enemy's] two or three battalions, the advantage is absolutely [on your side]. [You] do not need to completely annihilate both battalions. A single battle can damage the two badly enough that the enemy will not dare attack. That is the key issue in this. Therefore, regardless of the size of each battle, [you must pick your battles so as to] destroy the enemy's effective strength [in that place]. This is the most important thing on the front line [and] ultimately [you will] be able to win. Using simpler words, focus [your] strength [in one place] and eliminate the weaker force. Break them up. [I've] heard encouraging news that Vientiane also has guerrillas, that upper, middle, and lower Laos all have guerrillas. This is excellent. [It will] scatter the enemy [and make] development [difficult for the enemy]. In order to contain the enemy it must become a real people's patriotic war. [That is to say, you do] not have to focus it, [you do not have to] concentrate [it in a few places]. Invite the guerrillas to scatter behind enemy lines and conduct activities there. [When] I say [you] want to focus, I mean you must use your 7,000 troops to destroy the enemy's effective strength.

Another point, as you all know, [it is] not necessary to talk about too much, it is very important for the legitimate government led by Prince Phouma, Captain Kong Le, Souphanouvong, [and] the acting Prime Minister to all cooperate with Quinim Pholsena and the Lao Patriotic Front Party. You've been to Africa, Europe, and again back to China. [You've] attended the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference, [you] know the importance of a united front, it is not necessary to speak too much, I will just mention two points. Of course the most important thing is relying on the people: the revolutionary youth, the workers, the farmers, the patriotic military, as well as the upper class leaders, all together these compose the patriotic united front.

Is this clear [enough]? Do [you feel] that these observations are of interest [to you]?

Sisana Sisane: Very interesting. We have recorded [your] suggestions and will send them back in a report.

[Vice Premier] CHEN [Yi]: Please act on my behalf to send our deepest regards to Prime Minister Phouma, Prince Souphanouvong, and Captain Kong Le. Our views [as discussed here tonight] are not to be openly talked about. As for [the topic of] aid, [that is] no problem. We will go by way of Vietnam to delivery weapons, ammuniton, food, and other items [to you]. [Our] Soviet friends are also very positive, this is very good.

There is one [more] matter [I would] request you to convey to Prince Phouma's legitimate government and the Patriotic Front Party: if it is convenient, send someone directly to China for an official visit, we will [be very] welcoming [to an] official delegation from the government to come. We welcome [them].

Sisana Sisane: Are you referring to [welcoming] an official state visit, or are you referring to [welcoming a] permanent delegation?

[Vice Premier] CHEN [Yi: With regards] to a state visit, whether [your] delegation [comes] to talk about aid or for the formal establishment of diplomatic relations, we [will] welcome you. As far as we are concerned, there is no difficulty. We are happy to receive [a delegation from your government, but the kind of delegation] is up to your government to decide. However, [it would be best if] Prince Phouma and your part are in secret agreement. Our helping you does not require an official delegation to come or not come. You two are the official representatives of Laos. I can talk to you about these problems. It is the same. The main issue is to see you have no difficulty in conforming with [the actions of] the united front. Us Chinese feel that Prince Phouma's return to northern Laos is very important. You have to strive [for this]. China and the Soviet Union are in agreement that any international conference [on the topic of Laos] must have Prince Phouma's legitimate government at its head. It cannot have Bon Oum or Phoumi's group. If the Bon Oum/Phoumi group is in charge then it is the same as if America is in charge, and it is the same as supporting further American involvement in Laos's Civil War. [This would] bring disaster to the people of Laos. The situation is very complicated. Another problem [is that you must] prepare for a long-term struggle. It is obvious that [even though] Bon Oum and Phoumi's group wants to destroy your Patriotic Front Line Party [they will] not [be able to]. It is also very difficult for the revolution to successfully destroy Bon Oum and Phoumi in a short period of time. Therefore, [you should] prepare [at least] six months to a year for political and military advantage. Now [you] already have the political advantage. The next is to have the military [situation] change to your advantage. Consolidate Phongsali, Sam Neua, Xiengkhouang, and the Plain of Jars, and develop [them] to gain advantage. [This will] also need [at least] six months to a year's time. [You] cannot be impatient. Kong Le's coup resulted in a unified national front, what is now achieved was originally split, and during that era national unity had been destroyed, Souphanouvong had been arrested. Kong Le has retreated from Vientiane. The situation is rapidly changing. [You] must see [what other] developments [will take place]. Another aspect is that [we] also need to make long term preparations. [Even though you are] a friendly neighbor, [we are] lacking knowledge. Recently [we got] some new material, in accordance with China's experience, [we would like to] make some suggestions for your leaders, government and military to make use of. I wish you will emerge victorious.

Sisana Sisane: Just now [what we've been] talking about [has been] a good experience, [this information is really] very helpful to us. In reality, many aspects of the ideological struggle are somewhat confusing. When I was on the front line, there were some people who really wanted to rely on outside help, [they were] against [the idea of] self-reliance being primary. This way of thinking is wrong. We [have already] experienced eight years of war against France, therefore the combat troops in Laos do not [really] have an ideology [other than what has] developed after taking place in post-coup struggles. Some other organizations [or parties in Laos] have the hope that victory will [come] from relying on outside forces. We believe that via education and actual combat experience, this way of thinking can be changed. In point of fact the

lessons we learned through the eight years of war were very difficult, but we are greatly determined to improve our way of thinking. Since the Geneva meeting, it seems that cooperation between Laotian combat troops and the government of the Kingdom of Laos can take place. All the people support us. But that does not mean we have [yet] overcome the enemy.

[Vice Premier] CHEN [Yi]: You speak quite well. The world has not yet seen the people who, by relying on others, can achieve victory. [The people of] Laos and Asia experience great suffering, [it is] only by relying on themselves that they can get rid of [this] suffering. [Of course, you] can also seek foreign aid, but that should come after-wards rather than the other way around. You went to Africa to attend the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference, along with other African conferences this will inspire the Africa people [to action. To succeed, the most] important [thing is for the people of Africa to] rely on themselves to struggle. Africa has some people who have an erroneous idea, [they] think to rely on American aid. The Congo's [Patrice] LUMUMBA has eaten this failed [idea]. Laos and China have already solved this problem, but Africa has not yet solved it. The Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference went very well but I do not know whether or not they can accept [the conclusions reached]. You already have eight years' experience with war, [you] have [experience] cooperating with the government of kingdoms, [experience with] breaking up, and now with cooperating again. [One] could say you have quite a lot of experience. Although the struggle is long, success will be reached [in the end].

[We] should rest. [Do you] leave tomorrow?

Sisana Sisane: It is not yet certain. [In the] morning [we will] consider it [some. I] feel that the tasks [we came to] China [for] have not yet been completed. [I have already] sent a telegraph asking for [further instructions and] more time. An answer has not been received [yet]. Originally the plan was to leave Beijing tomorrow then go to other places. We current wish to stay some more time and learn some valuable experience [from you] but, in any case, we must return home before March 15th to prepare some work [based on] the decisions of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference.