

*Inquiries of the Ministry*

In the second of these requests dated May 22, 1958 the prime minister of Laos stated that the task entrusted to the commission was "drawing successfully to a close", and he expressed on behalf of his government "its profound gratitude for the efficacious assistance" of the commission in re-establishing in the kingdom a "normal situation in respect of its unity, sovereignty and independence".

The normal situation to which the prime minister of Laos referred in his letter of May, 1958 did not, unhappily, long prevail. In the fall of 1959 the security council took steps to send a committee to Laos in the hope that this would stop the trouble which had already arisen there at that time. I believe there is still a United Nations presence in Laos, but obviously that fact has not prevented the civil war which is going on there at the present time.

In recent months the situation has become increasingly critical so that at present there is not only a state of open hostilities, but also an absence of general international agreement on the identity of the legitimate government. The communist side is claiming that one man is the head of the government and the western side is claiming another man is. The conflicts within the country have engaged the sympathies and to some extent the support of interested powers outside. This is actually a question which the big powers must settle. If they do not agree to some settlement, in any event if they do not keep their hands off, it is quite impossible for other countries to bring about a settlement.

I need hardly remind the house that such a situation imperils not only the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Laos, which the members of the Geneva conference undertook to respect, but also the peace and stability of southeast Asia in general. In these circumstances it is natural that there should have been suggestions that a return to Laos of the international supervisory commission might help to reduce tensions and promote a peaceful solution of Laos' difficulties.

Such a reconvening of the commission presented, however, certain difficulties. In the first place, the task originally assigned to the commission was to supervise and control the application of a cease-fire agreement already reached by the great powers at the Geneva conference. There was no question of the commission itself bringing about a cease-fire. Second, it is clear that an essential condition for the effective functioning of a commission so constituted would be basic agreement among the other powers directly interested on its return and on the duties it should perform. Third, unless it had an assurance of the co-operation of the Laotian

authorities it would be unable to operate effectively, and its position would be untenable.

I might remind the house in this connection, Mr. Speaker, that at the time the commission was adjourned we made quite clear that if in any future emergency the commission were to be recalled, we would always have in mind the rights of the Laotian government and would respect the sovereignty of that country. The Canadian government, therefore, while fully in sympathy with the desire to take action quickly in a critical situation, has sought to ensure that the means adopted would be those which, given the existing circumstances, would give the best promise of success.

It was with these considerations in mind that I suggested an exploratory mission might be sent to Laos to find out by consultation with the Laotian authorities what precisely could usefully be done in the present circumstances.

In this connection my suggestion was that the three key men who went to southeast Asia in 1954 or 1955—I am not sure of the exact year—would go back as members of this exploratory mission. The Canadian member was Brigadier Sherwood Lett of Vancouver, who is now chief justice of the supreme court of British Columbia. Chief Justice Lett has offered to go out in this capacity. The Indian representative, Mr. M. Desai, unfortunately has not been well and is on sick leave. This proposal that there be an exploratory mission made up of these three key people was not generally acceptable.

Discussions are continuing with a view to establishing an agreed basis of proceeding along these general lines. We for our part are willing, if the United Kingdom and the Soviet union as co-chairmen of the Geneva conference so request, and subject to the agreement of the king of Laos—we are not asking for the agreement of the Laotian government but for the agreement of the king of Laos, who is the only generally recognized constitutional authority of that country—to appoint a Canadian representative to the commission, which would do what it could in present circumstances, by consultation and advice, to contribute to the restoration of peace and to the maintenance of the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Laos.

If the commission is reconvened I do not believe that all the responsibility for working out a cease-fire could fairly be placed on it, because in fact it was never set up to bring about that result, but it probably could help.

As I pointed out earlier, discussions are taking place. Some discussions are actually