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Laos - 1959

11 June

Nehru, Jawaharlal (Prime Minister
of India)

- 1 letter from D.H.

11 June 1959

My dear Mr. Nehru,

Ambassador Jha has transmitted to me your letter of 27 May 1959 for which I thank you.

I have given serious consideration to the evaluation of the situation which you describe and to your suggestions for action from my side. As you will remember from our talk in New Delhi, I have for long been concerned about the possibility that the difficulties which have arisen between Laos and North-Vietnam, if permitted to continue, might lead us into a dangerous and unmanageable situation. Your judgement gives added weight to such fears, indicating, as it does, further complications. My own opinion, as expressed to you at the time of my visit to Delhi, was that it is essential to get an operation going which may bring us out of the difficulties, and it has not changed. On the contrary, I feel more strongly than before that serious efforts must be made in that direction.

Regarding the position and responsibilities of the major power-blocs, I have stated my views frankly to the Foreign Secretaries concerned. Thus, I have argued that the Indo-China states should be enabled to concentrate on their economic and social development, free from interventions of the power-blocs and non-aligned with either of them. It is my impression that the views I have thus expressed have been carefully noted.

As to the immediate steps that might be taken, and in particular the possible role of the Commission, you will remember that it was my view that a good offices or mediation operation required preliminary action from the Commission, but that, on the other hand, I felt that the activities of the Commission could and should be limited to the minimum necessary in order to get a mediation effort underway. This stand was based on a consideration of the various elements entering the picture. The Commission had adjourned sine die. Laos claimed that they had taken all possible steps for an integration and that, therefore, the undertakings under the Geneva agreement were met, so that the Commission should have no further function relating to what now must be considered the internal affairs of Laos. On the other hand, from the North-Vietnam point of view, a good offices or mediation action could not be given such a form as, by implication, to by-pass or liquidate a procedure which North-Vietnam considered an essential and still valid element of the arrangements made in Geneva.

His Excellency
Shri Jawaharlal Nehru,
Prime Minister and Minister
for External Affairs,
New Delhi, India.

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The specific line of action which I had in mind at the time of our talk, scaled down to its essentials, was that the Commission should meet outside Laos after the assignment of the missing Canadian representative. The meeting would not be publicised and should not be considered to be a re-activation of the work of the Commission. Its purpose would be to approve that action be taken, for example by its Secretary, in Hanoi and Vientiane, with the aim of getting the two Governments to join in inviting somebody to mediate the territorial conflict. Thus, the Commission should not itself go into the substance of that conflict or related problems. This limitation already seemed indicated in view of the fact that the Commission was not organised so as to serve effectively in a good offices or mediation function. Further, the public stand taken by Laos had to be taken into account.

Since my return I have acted on the basis of this idea, and discussed with the Government of Canada the possibility that they appoint their representative in order to enable the Commission to take the suggested action. You may know what the reaction of the Canadian Government has been, as I understand that you have addressed yourself directly to Prime Minister Diefenbaker. On the other hand, it was my understanding that India would seek to determine whether Poland, on the basis of the same general idea of the significance and limitation of the step, would be willing to take part in a meeting of the Commission outside Laos.

The situation now has changed to some extent. If I understand the position of Laos correctly, the Government feels that a meeting of the Commission for the indicated purpose would have to be "informal and unofficial", while, on the other hand, I gather from your letter that you consider substantive action by the Commission difficult to avoid in view of later developments. However, as regards your stand, I have understood from Ambassador Jha that you would consider it natural that activities should be strictly limited to the present situation and that, thus, it should be avoided that the resumption of the activities of the Commission be regarded as more than a temporary measure or as re-activating its current operations.

If I interpret your attitude correctly, we would thus have in common on the one side the opinion that the Commission cannot be by-passed; on the other side, the view that its activities should be properly circumscribed. Personally, I would consider it unfortunate if the Commission started discussing possible activities of one power-bloc, or the other, as this might bring the cold war openly into the picture. I would also hold that it would be difficult for the Commission, against the stand taken by Laos, to go into what the Government of Laos defines as a domestic problem. Whatever the legal merits of the case, the position of the Government of Laos regarding its own previous actions has to be taken into account at least as a political fact which would render the cooperation of Laos with the Commission difficult.

There then remains the territorial conflict. In the light of the foregoing observations, I would appreciate it if you could indicate how you would like to circumscribe the activities of the Commission, were it to meet again. If, as I understand, you consider it impossible to limit it to what I originally had in mind, do you then consider it possible to limit its activities to the territorial question, or do you feel that the Commission must be free to go into the Pathet Lao problem and, possibly, also into such complaints as may be forthcoming regarding interventions by outside powers, contrary to the Geneva agreement?

There is one further question. Obviously, if I follow correctly your line of thinking, the Commission might go straight into the substance of the situation, or it might, in the first instance, take the formal step of getting mediation started, as originally suggested, deferring any discussion of substance - in whatever way such a discussion may be limited - until it is seen if such a discussion becomes necessary because the mediation has failed. I have no suggestions to make, for the present, in this or other respects, but would find it most helpful to know also how you look at this second question. You will appreciate that this question, like the foregoing one, is of great significance for my continued consideration of the possibilities to take further action in the spirit and in the direction indicated by you in your letter.

I assure you that I do, and will do, all that I can in order to promote a constructive approach so that grave conflict may be averted in Indo-China. I am gratified to have the privilege of this contact with you regarding the situation and possible lines of action on it.

Dag Hammarskjöld