

A memory of a great man

Today is the 98th anniversary of the birth of President Souphanouvong

□ EKAPHONE PHOUTHONESY

Despite his death over a decade ago, the legend of Souphanouvong, the Red Prince, still lives on in the memories of many people including Mr Hansana Sisan, son of Sisana Sisan, former Minister of Information and Culture.

"Sisana Sisan is my father's name. When he was alive, he once told me about Prince Souphanouvong," said Mr Hansana in his writing in 2004.

Mr Hansana, who owns the Karnchana Textiles Shop in Vientiane, said that the hundreds of years of history of Laos is a history of war and fighting. Kings fought one another to take power. At the end it became the Lane Xang Kingdom. It then was invaded by Siam (Thailand) and then became a French colony and was later dominated by American imperialists.

Many kings have sacrificed their lives for the cause of the

said.

"It was a brutal time," he added. "On the Thakhek battlefield, about 3,000 people were killed, forcing many Issara fighters and people from the royal family to surrender to the French invaders. My father said that even though Prince Souphanouvong was seriously injured in the battlefield, many freedom fighters including Prince Souphanouvong made up their minds to fight until the end". After France took over the town of Thakhek, Prince Souphanouvong then set up his revolutionary movement in Thailand. After a while, the Thai dictators in government announced that the Lao Issara was against the law, which created unfavourable conditions for the revolutionary movement, so therefore Prince Souphanouvong returned home.

After a while many revolutionaries joined Prince Souphanouvong and the *Neo*

Prince Souphanouvong and other revolutionaries were honoured to host the wedding ceremony. Prince Souphanouvong advised my father to hold the wedding ceremony at my mother's birthplace in accordance with tradition," he said.

"Even though he was living in the jungle, facing many difficult conditions, Prince Souphanouvong still thought of tradition," Mr Hansana said.

The fighting in this period of time was increasingly fierce. North Vietnam gained victory on the Dien Bien Phu battlefield, which forced France to withdraw its troops from Indochina. But the fighting between Neo Lao Issara, *Neo Lao Hak Xat* (Lao Patriotic Front) and Lao royalist or rightist troops, assisted by American imperialists was continuing. Neo Lao Hak Xat's troops continuously gained victories, forcing the rightist's troops to negotiate, which led to



Scenery in front of the Souphanouvong memorial square.

including Prince Souphanouvong and Mr Hansana's father.

"My father told me that during the first week, the authority allowed wives of the delegates to visit them. I was then four years old. I cried and embraced my father's legs when guards at the Phonkheng prison ordered us to leave when visiting time was over," said Mr Hansana.

"After a while, the guards found that Aunt Viengkham (wife of Prince Souphanouvong) hid a letter inside the sticky rice basket, so they then did not allow us to pay visits to them. They fenced the area with zinc roofs and made a small gap in it to allow the prisoners to look at their wives outside of the jail. I met with a former guard, Lieutenant Colonel Onsa Vilavong, who took the Pathet

Lao delegates out of the jail and said that while he had a strong mind, he was not able to stop the feeling of pity when seeing the delegates under these conditions," he said.

"They are normal people, they love their wives and children, they are not wild as Phouy claimed," Mr Hansana said. "The conditions got worse when Phouy Sananikone announced that he would give the Pathet Lao delegates the death penalty. My mother told me that at the time she was pregnant with a second son and Aunt Viengkham was also pregnant with her last son, Mr Sinava Souphanouvong."

Mr Hansana's mother, Aunt Viengkham, Aunt Khampheng Boupoua and Aunt Hinsila Sipaseuth all went to complain to General Phoumy Noursavanh.

"Your Excellency arrested our husbands, how will we survive? We have not received our husband's salary, moreover you will kill them," Mr Hasana said, referring to what his mother had told him. "General Phoumy at the time laughed and said This is war, one side will be killed."

Prince Souphanouvong was born in 1909 in the royal family in Luang Prabang province. He was the first President of the Lao PDR. He died in 1995 at the age of 86. Since his death, high-ranking party and government members pay annual visits to his pagoda at That Luang Temple on his birthday. The government also named Souphanouvong University in Luang Prabang in his honour and built Souphanouvong memorial square in Vientiane for the Lao people to pay their respects.



A set of Souphanouvong photos at his memorial square.

country's independence, but only Prince Souphanouvong made this dream reality in the last century, according to Mr Hansana.

Mr Hansana pointed out that one of the fierce battles, during which Prince Souphanouvong commanded the Freedom troops (Issara), the soldiers fought bravely until the end of their lives in a battle in Thakhek, Khammuan province.

"I read a history book about the Thakhek battlefield. They ordered Lao and Vietnamese people, both old and young, to stand in line on the banks of the Mekong and then they shot them with machine guns. Many hundreds of children were put into sacks of rice and thrown into the river or beaten with *Kokmong* (traditional mortar that people use to mill rice)," he

Lao Issara (Lao Freedom Front) was then set up. Prince Souphanouvong was elected as President of the front. Revolutionary bases of the Neo Lao Issara were set up under the theme of "long fighting to make sure victory at the end".

Mr Hansana pointed out that at the time his father met his mother (Ms Bua) there. Because of his patriotic, enemy-hating spirit, his mother decided to engage in the revolutionary movement. At this early time, she worked as a cook, preparing meals for Issara soldiers, but once she was fully committed to the Issara's policy, she got a new post and conducted propaganda work in Huaphan province.

"After learning about each other, my father and mother got engaged and because father stayed far away from his family,

a settlement of Coalition Government.

Prince Souphanouvong and other members of the Neo Lao Hak Xat came to Vientiane for the national parliament election. Prince Souphanouvong and Sisana Sisan were elected as members of the parliament.

At the time, it seemed that the peace would be settled, but after a short period of time, American imperialists began to interfere in Laos. Phouy Sananikone put pressure on the Prince, who was at that time Prime Minister of the Coalition Government, and asked him to resign from his post. War started again, in Xieng Khuang, and the rightist's army surrounded the *Pathet Lao* or Issara troops. While in Vientiane, Phouy Sananikone ordered the arrest of 16 delegates of the Pathet Lao

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