

Do you keep a file on Laos

Life in Laos Under

By Jacques Decornoy
Pacific News Service

Sam Neua, Laos

We had come to Sam Neua province from Hanoi. The Soviet-made command car proceeded hiccupping over a road struck by bombs and made slippery by the rain.

It took almost two full nights to reach Sam Neua, after much skidding in the mud and many dangerous encounters with trucks on the small mountain road.

To the very end of the journey, the car had to be navigated between craters left by bombs and rockets. A wooden ladder leaning across the limestone rock gave access to the cave-hotel, a natural hole in the mountain, "improved" with dynamite. A tiny motor distributed that extreme rare commodity in "liberated" Laos: electricity.

This retreat for hunted guerrillas is managed by Kempeth Pholsens, an anti-French graduate of Moscow University, daughter of Quinn Pholsens, the former Laotian minister of foreign affairs and neutralist leader who was assassinated in Vientiane in April, 1963.

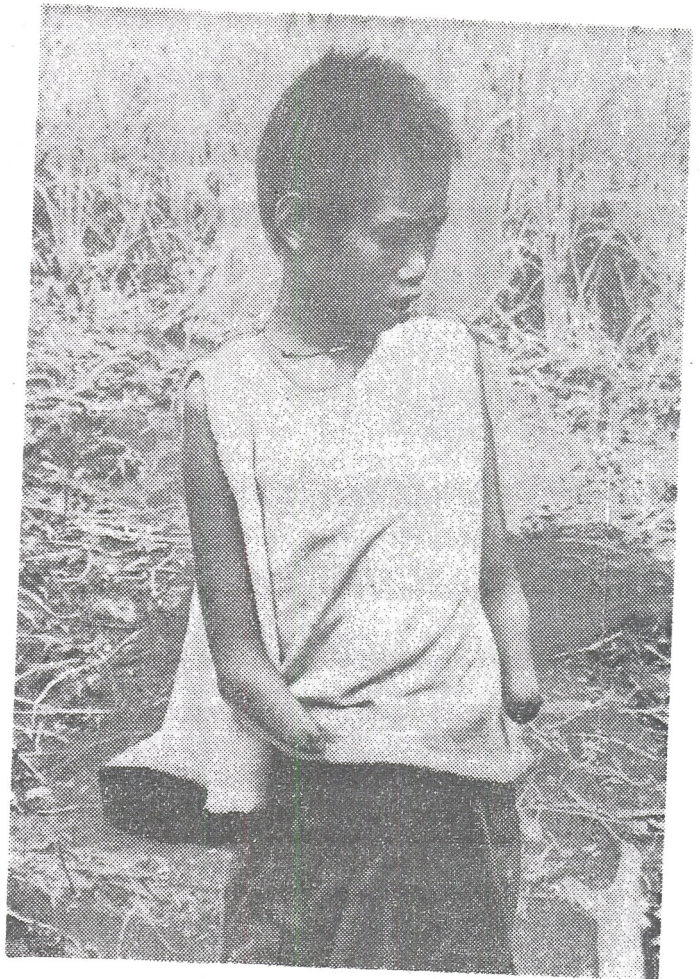
Life here is very simple. On a rocky platform which forms the entrance to the cave, a wash basin has been set, a dangerous place for anyone to stick his nose too far out; at times it is impossible to finish shaving because of the jets from Thailand prowling about. Then, one lies flat on the floor of the cave, his only view a glimpse of the sky and a few flower pots attached to the rock by wire.

It is a difficult life, but still possible in this season. But when the rainy season begins, water penetrates the chalky mass and drips into the "hotel." It is a silent world, for the surrounding villages have disappeared, and the inhabitants also live hidden in the mountains.

Animals

Some water buffalo and a few pigs wander about at our feet among the craters made by the American bombs.

On a "usual" morning . . . at 7 o'clock an AD-6 plane prowls overhead. It circles for about ten minutes, then leaves. At 7:30 the plane returns, makes a pass and drops three loads several miles from the "hotel." At 8



By Ed Rasen

A young victim of the Sam Neua bombing

the U.S. Bombs

there is a flight of jets. At 8:30, new jets and bombs. And the same operation at 9.

One of the officials of the Sam Neua district told us that during the first three years of the bombing alone, 65 villages were destroyed. This figure was not verified, but it is a fact, that between Sam Neua and a place about 30 kilometers away, not a single house in the villages and hamlets had been spared. Bridges have been destroyed, and fields riddled with bomb craters.

Craters

At the other end of Sam Neua the sight is even more painful. Enormous craters are everywhere. Churches and many houses have been demolished.

The Americans dropped fragmentation bombs. Here by the side of the road lies a disemboweled "mother bomb." All around for tens of meters, the earth is covered with unexploded "daughter bombs" containing hundreds of steel pellets, little weapons that the Vietnamese know so well. One of them had rolled into a shelter, under a mat, mortally wounding three peo-

ple who had taken refuge there.

"All Americans must get out of Laos." This assertion continually comes up in conversation with Pathet Lao cadres who must be met on their own ground in order to appreciate how fundamental this demand is for them. In their minds it is not only a question of stopping the air raids. The Americans themselves must pull out, as well as the "private" air companies (Air America, Continental) which supply provisions, arms and indeed more than 3000 "advisers" (of whom 72 are military attaches at the United States Embassy) to the CIA-supported Meo Armee Clandestine of General Vang Pao.

For the Pathet Lao, Washington's influence on the various aspects of daily life must disappear entirely.

Since the bombing of Laos began some five years ago, F-4 Phantom and F-105 Thunderchief fighter bombers which carry 10,000 to 15,000 pounds of bombs, and B-52s, which carry four to six times that bomb load, have made daily runs.

This past year they are re-

ported to have flown more than 20,000 sorties a month. This is over Sam Neua and the Plain of Jars area alone, which does not include the saturation bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos.

The result, as U.S. Ambassador to Laos G. McMurtire Godfrey testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is that almost one-third of Laos' population of three million has been made into homeless refugees.

Puzzled

The inhabitants of Sam Neua ask themselves the reason for this deluge of fire and steel. "I don't even know where America is," said a peasant woman whose daughter had just been killed. She had lost everything she had.

A peasant remarked, "I understood nothing that was said about American aid and against the United States. After the raids on my village, I knew what they meant. Everything American, far and wide, is hated by the people."

(Jacques Decornoy has long been Southeast Asia correspondent for Le Monde.)