

'A Lake of Blood'



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By FRED BRANFMAN

I have recently returned from Laos, where I spent the last four years. During the last year we interviewed over 1,000 refugees from northeastern Laos and the four provinces in southern Laos through which the Ho Chi Minh Trail runs. They had left these Pathet Lao-controlled areas, which are today inhabited by an American-estimated half-million civilians.

Each, without exception, said that his village had been totally leveled by bombing. Each, without exception, said that he had spent months or even years on end hiding in holes or trenches dug into foothills.

The refugees say that the bombing began in 1964. One twenty-year-old boy from Khangkhai, in northeastern Laos, describes it: "The bombing began first on the Plaine des Jarres, then at Khangkhai. Everyone seemed afraid because we had never seen anything like this, and we didn't even know where the planes came from. But we knew they were jets because the noise was like one made by the thunder."

When asked why they did not keep on the move, one mother of three explained, "How could we? We had to try and grow enough rice to survive. The children and grandparents could not live a life of constant movement. And we had to try and care for our buffalo and cows, our belongings."

struction, most pitiful for friends and children and old people. Before, my life was most enjoyable and we worked in our ricefields and gardens. Our progress was great. But then came changes in the manner of the war, which caused us to lose our land, our upland and paddy ricefields, our cows and our buffaloes. For there were airplanes and the sounds of bombs throughout the sky and hills. All we had were the holes."

But though the people spent most of their time hiding in caves and tunnels, they were forced to go out at least once a day. They had to try and grow enough rice or manioc to survive; to pound rice, relieve themselves or beg food from better-off neighbors; to graze and water livestock, for whom they felt a strong bond of affection. As one old man put it, "My buffaloes were a source of 100,000 loves and 100,000 worries for me."

When they did, there was a good chance they would be riddled by anti-personnel bombs, shredded by fragmentation bombs, burned by napalm or buried alive by 500-pound bombs.

A 35-year-old man who, sitting bare-torsoed in a small hut one day, explained: "Me Ou was my mother-in-law. She was 59 when she died on Feb. 20, 1968. The jets had come over about 10 A.M. and she was hiding in our trench with the rest of my family. It was cold and she was an old lady. She decided to leave the trench about 3 P.M. to get some clothing for the children and herself. She went into our house about twenty yards away. Suddenly the jets came again and bombed our village. She didn't have time to get out of the house. She was burned alive."

The Plaine des Jarres is today a deserted wasteland.

One 35-year-old woman from the Plaine des Jarres has written: "Every

day and every night the planes came to drop bombs on us. We lived in holes in order to protect our lives. There were bombs of many kinds . . . I saw my cousin die in the field of death. My heart was most disturbed, and my voice called out loudly as I ran to the houses. Thusly, I saw the life of the population and the dead people on account of the war with many airplanes in the region of Xiengkhouang. Until there were no houses at all. And the cows and buffalo were dead. Until it was leveled and you could see only the red, red ground. I think of this time and still I am afraid."

In spite of all they have been through, the people we have talked to are relatively fortunate. They are out from under. Today millions of civilians in Laos and Cambodia remain under precisely the same conditions.

It must be understood that the guerrillas of Indochina have long since learned to keep on the move constantly through the forest in small groups, mostly at night; that our infra-red scopes cannot locate them, and our jets bombing at 600 miles an hour cannot hit them; that even the United States Air Force does not pointlessly drop ordnance in the forest; and that as more airplanes are made available, the purpose of the bombing becomes, in the words of Robert Shaplen, writing in *Foreign Affairs* of April 1970, "to destroy the social and economic fabric in enemy areas."

We are carrying out "tactical air support" for troops in combat, and "air interdiction" against trucks, to be sure. But we are at the same time practicing the most protracted bombing of civilian targets in history.

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It is of 1969, however, when American jets bombing North Vietnam were diverted into Laos, that the refugees speak most. When asked how often the planes came, they uniformly report that they "cannot count." As an old leathery-faced man put it, "The planes came like the birds, and the bombs fell like the rain."

One 37-year-old rice farmer said: "In the region of Xiengkhouang there came to be a lake of blood and de-