

The Bombing in Indochina-

By ANTHONY LEWIS

Sources said the bombing of the Plaine des Jarres was made easy by the fact that there were practically no civilians left in it.

—Reuters dispatch from Vientiane

LONDON, Dec. 31 — Before 1967, more than 100,000 people lived in the Plaine des Jarres. They got in the way of the American bombers operating over Laos, but this inconvenience was removed in a way reminiscent of Swift's "A Modest Proposal": The inhabitants were all either killed or forced out of their homes as refugees.

That is one example, not a particularly large one, of what the United States has done in Indochina in the name of democracy and self-determination. The figures are so huge, so horrendous, that they may no longer mean anything to the Americans who read them.

Prof. Arthur H. Westing of Windham College, Vermont, estimated the other day that there are "several hundred thousand" unexploded bombs and shells in Vietnam alone. (There are

many more in Laos and Cambodia.) What does that mean, unless one sees a photograph of a small Indochinese boy who picked up what looked like a toy in a field and now has bandages over the stumps of his arms?

E. W. Pfeiffer, a University of Montana zoologist who has just finished an environmental study in Vietnam with Professor Westing, tells us that American bombing has left twenty million craters. They range from twenty to fifty feet wide and five to twenty feet deep.

Nor is bombing the only American technique of mass destruction. There is the defoliation that affected one-eighth of the acreage of South Vietnam, destroying food crops for 600,000 people and vast miles of valuable forest. There are the 150 bulldozers working every day to strip land of all cover—even more damaging ecologically than herbicides, according to Messrs. Westing and Pfeiffer. There is the "daisy cutter" bomb, which they estimate has so far killed every living thing in 116,000 acres of Indochina.

In a war, all sides commit acts

AT HOME ABROAD

of cruelty. But there is a qualitative difference, a moral difference, in the methods used by the United States in this war.

It is, increasingly, an automated war for the Americans. Killing is done at a distance, without the killers having to face the unpleasant reality of human beings mutilated or dead right there in front of them.

The world's most technologically developed country is using all its skill in destructive techniques against a peasant population. And against people who are not white—a fact that we may tell ourselves is happenstance but that much of the world considers no accident.

American officials so often show an astounding insensitivity to the consequences of our war methods. There was a remark the other day that must have set a record for official blindness. A Pentagon spokesman said that Hanoi's refusal to accept 900 gift pack-

See also "Scorch Their Earth," by Anthony Lewis, NYTimes 8 May 72, this file; column deals more fully with study by Pfeiffer and Westing mentioned above.

In column of 24 Apr 72 (New Orleans States-Item, this file) Lewis says more than one ton of bombs was dropped on Indochina for every minute of the Nixon Administration.

-I: The Cost Part II, Jan 3 72.

ages for American prisoners was "inhumane and uncivilized"—that while American bombers were carrying out 1,000 sorties on North Vietnam.

There is a similar arrogance in some of the reasons given for the resumption of large-scale bombing. The North Vietnamese had attacked "unarmed U.S. reconnaissance planes," American officials said—an Orwellian lie since those reconnaissance planes are accompanied by armed fighters. And North Vietnam had been used "as a sanctuary," it was said, to attack American planes bombing Laos. What about American "sanctuaries" in Thailand or on carriers standing off the North Vietnamese coast?

The official view is apparently that the United States has a divine right to fly and bomb at will over the entire Indochinese peninsula without challenge by enemy aircraft or missiles. If the North Vietnamese dare to put up an air defense, we are entitled to punish them. It is a notion fitter for psychological than political analysis.

It is against this background of American war methods and attitudes

that the decision to renew heavy bombing in the North must be judged.

Those five days of bombing—and how many more days in the future?—will cost dearly. The world has fresh reason to doubt what most people once took for granted: the fundamental decency of America. Worse yet, Americans will feel revived in themselves those terrible self-hatreds and doubts about the integrity of the political process that almost tore the country apart in 1968.

Even those who think such moral costs are piffle should worry about the consequences for effective American influence in the world. For what we have done in Vietnam—and what we are now dramatically seen to be doing still—has crippled our ability to insist that other nations give diplomacy a chance and avoid the use of force.

That was clear in the India-Pakistan crisis. We simply could not be taken seriously when we said to India in effect: "The kind of interests we are pursuing in Vietnam justify resort to bloodshed, but yours do not."