

Peace Seems to Reign In Tense Laotian Area

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HAT DUA, Laos, Feb. 28—Both Government and Communist forces have been through this refugee settlement in the northern Vientiane plain since the cease-fire went into effect last Thursday, and the jittery population seems anxious to avoid offending anyone. Essentially, the region is at ease.

Despite a little shooting, no one has been hurt around here, and a conviction seems to be growing that for the moment at least the war is over.

Some 10,000 refugees are scattered through the dusty, scrub-covered hills in this area 60 miles north of Vientiane. Most arrived two years ago from the eastern province of Xieng Khouang, now mostly controlled by the Communists.

Hat Dua and neighboring towns have been watched closely since the cease-fire, partly because they lie along the western banks of the



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A close watch on Hat Dua region is being kept by the Laotian Government.

confluence of two rivers—the Nam Lik and the Nam Ngum—which mark the cease-fire line established in 1962.

There were fears in the Government that the Pathet Lao would move swiftly to occupy as much territory as possible on the western banks, possibly even threatening Route 13, the road north from Vientiane to the royal capital at Luang Prabang.

Scene of Heavy Fighting

Just north of here the road leaves the Vientiane plain, winding up into narrow mountain passes, through the only American supply depot at Vang Vieng and on to Sala Phou Khoun, junction of routes 7 and 13, where some of the heaviest fighting in recent months has taken place.

Though the westward drive has not materialized, there have been some scares.

Last Friday about 20 Pathet Lao soldiers who had crossed the Nam Lik appeared in this unshackled hamlet and raised the red, white and blue Neo Lao Hak Xat flag in front of the two schools here and at the marketplace.

reportedly tried to make contact with Government troops to exchange cigarettes or drinks, but the Government forces have orders to rebuff such approaches and to open fire if flags are raised.

Meanwhile, military printers have produced tens of thousands of paper Government flags—red, with a white three-headed elephant design—which have been plastered on trees and houses all along main roads and on many of the trails leading from them, but not in Vientiane.

The Government has usually attached a notice to each flag telling the citizens that a cease-fire has been in effect since Thursday.

As for the refugees, it is difficult to discern their loyalty, or even whether they have any particular political views. Most have relatives on the Pathet Lao side, and it is assumed that the Communists have a strong clandestine organization here.

The refugees, fearful of shelling and air raids, look up uneasily when the drone of fighter-bombers becomes audible in the distance.

Ten miles or so to the east a group of Japanese and Laotian technicians continues to operate the two-year-old Nam Ngum hydroelectric dam without apparent fear.

"We heard some shooting near here for the first couple of days after the cease-fire," a technician said, "but no one will make any trouble for us, even on the roads deep in Pathet Lao territory. They are as much interested in the economic development of Laos as anyone else."

Americans on Road Project

Two American civil engineers supervising a road project some 20 miles away said much the same thing.

"If you go charging into their areas it's like running into a bear's cave, and you come out feet first," one said. "But they know we won't do that, and they know our yellow trucks and earth-moving gear are working for all of Laos. They know where we are and we know where they are, and we don't give each other trouble."

Real communication between Pathet Lao-controlled and Government-controlled hinterland regions is still out of the question. The permanent Pathet Lao delegate in Vientiane, Sot Petrasy, who was asked if he could provide correspondents with safe-conduct passes in the Pathet Lao zone, replied: "It is too early to talk about such things now since the cease-fire is not effective. Furthermore, I would not advise you to try such a thing on your own."

In one village a correspondent persuaded a shopkeeper to help improvise a white flag for use in approaching a supposed Pathet Lao strongpoint nearby. The expedition failed, and a villager remarked, "The Pathet Lao were certainly watching you, but they were probably too occupied laughing at your flag to talk to you."

In a country consisting mostly of uninhabited mountains, the people living in some 800 villages on the Vientiane plain represent a large proportion of the population of three million. And on the Vientiane plain the cease-fire appears to be as effective as almost anyone could want.

What happened next remains in dispute, since villagers deny having seen anything except the flags themselves. Most local accounts say the Pathet Lao tried to invite Government soldiers for a drink to celebrate the cease-fire. The Government maintains that the Pathet Lao began shelling its troops from across the river.

Whatever the case, a brief clash ensued and the Pathet Lao went back across the river with Government forces in pursuit. Since then it has been quiet.

In a number of other incidents Pathet Lao units have