

Communist Attacks, U.S. Bombs

Plight of Refugees in Laos

By Fred Branfman
Chronicle Foreign Service

Vientiane

Current Communist pressure on CIA base Long Cheng, with counterattacks by U.S. aircraft, has made refugees out of an estimated 65,000 tribespeople. Many of them are abandoning their homes for the second and third time.

The flow underscores a population movement in Laos involving an estimated 750,000 people since 1967. Over 1000 interviews with refugees from Communist zones indicate that leaving the villages was directly related to American bombing.

The American Embassy here estimates that over one million civilians inhabit the mountainous two-thirds of Laos controlled by the Pathet Lao. The past year has brought more than 30,000 of them into Mekong Valley. Their reports have given outsiders the first clear picture of the life being led by the hundreds of thousands of villagers left behind.

The refugees say that from 1964 until 1967 bombing of villages was relatively sporadic, and conducted mostly by Lao and American prop aircraft. Beginning in 1968, however, regular bombing of villages began, largely by American jets, and most were evacuated. Raids increased considerably after November, 1968, when jets were diverted into Laos after the bombing halt over North Vietnam.

COUNT

Refugees uniformly report that they "cannot count" how often the planes came in 1969, that they might bomb as often as five or six times on a given day. As a 60-year-old man put it, "the planes came like the birds, and the bombs fell like the rain."

During 1967 and 1968 most moved into the forest in the vicinity of their villages. They constructed small bamboo shelters near caves, trenches dug into hills, or holes camouflaged by sticks and leaves. Many stayed in their hiding places for months on end. Others lived in their shelters, running for a trench, cave or hole at the sound of an aircraft.

They estimate that it would take four people about a month to dig a trench or hole suitable for a family. Most households report that they dug several such hideaways during the course of the heavy bombing. "We would try to find places where we thought the planes wouldn't bomb," a 62-year-old woman

from the Plain of Jars said, "but in the end they bombed everywhere."

CASUALTIES

The bombing caused heavy casualties—often as high as 25 per cent in villages surveyed. Most civilians were killed or wounded by anti-personnel bombs, though victims of 500 pound bombs, napalm, fragmentation bombs and strafing have also been recorded in refugee camps.

Villagers say that they had to leave their retreats regularly to raise food, care for livestock, pound rice, and perform other such essential tasks. Many casualties occurred during these occasions.

Older people and children were the main victims.

The refugees said that the children were the most likely to become afraid and fail to find shelter during a raid, or accidentally detonate a delayed-action or unexploded bomb after one. Older people, they said, "could not run fast enough" or did not react quickly due to the disabilities of age.

LIFE

Education, normal commerce, religious observance and agricultural production were severely curtailed. The bombing in 1967 and 1968 caused schools, markets, cooperative stores and pagodas to be relocated in the forest. Heavier bombing after that made regular groupings of people almost impossible.

Fear of being seen from the air also restricted farming activities. By 1969 villagers had abandoned most of their ricefields, turning to cultivation of manioc in the forest and subsistence plots of rice. They say that they mainly worked on their fields at night, with the aid of small kerosene lamps. Har-

Hanoi Predicts U.S. Ground Role in Laos

Tokyo

North Vietnam's Communist party newspaper predicted yesterday that U.S. rescue missions in Laos would lead "before long to a sizable force of U.S. combat troops . . . which in fact is an aggressor army."

The Pentagon announced Friday that such teams might be sent into Laos to find and rescue downed U.S. airmen.

A commentary broadcast by Hanoi's Vietnam News

Agency said that, by Defense Department logic, rescue teams could be sent in whenever planes fly over Laos and the "aggressor army" troops would be sent to protect them.

The newspaper said the invaders would command South Vietnamese troops in Laos "and fight beside them just as U.S. troops fought in Cambodia last May and are currently fighting in South Vietnam."

Associated Press

* 27 FEB 71, N.Y.T., NEDRICK SOUTH

vested rice lying out in the open was a particular target.

They describe long and often hazardous portage as one of the greatest hardships. They say that before the bombing began the Pathet Lao army handled its logistics by itself. But as the raids grew in intensity villagers were called upon to carry ammunition and rice for as long as several months a year.

Livestock posed a particular problem. Many cows and buffaloes were killed by bombs or by ingesting grass or water poisoned by defoliants. Unable to farm without

their livestock, and feeling a strong bond of affection for them, they did not consider abandoning them. The need to graze and water their animals led to frequent exposure. As a 40-year-old farmer put it, "My buffalo were the source of 100,000 loves and 100,000 worries for me."

The danger of lighting fires is also often mentioned. Smoke by day or firelight at night seemed likely to attract the bombers. Refugees say that they often were afraid to cook, and found it difficult to bear the cold during the freezing dry-season nights.

DAMAGE

The bombing caused considerable material damage. Homes, rice warehouses, livestock, fruit trees, vegetable gardens, and housing and farming implements have been destroyed in the raids. Village-wide losses include schools, clinics, pagodas and cooperative stores.

The bombing did little damage to the Pathet Lao army, refugees say. Communist guerrillas moved through the forest in small groups, avoiding the villages. They were adept at digging in and figuring out where the planes were likely to strike.

Interviews with about 100 Pathet defectors tend to confirm this.

One former company commander with the Pathet Lao said, "The planes could rarely locate us. If they did, they could not come too low or we might shoot them down. If

they stayed high, they could not hit us. I never lost a single man to the planes in five years. We were not frightened by the planes, but the villagers were terrified."

Refugee reports are also supported by such eyewitness accounts as those of Le Monde correspondent, Jacques Decornoy, who visited the Pathet Lao stronghold of Xiang Khoang province in the spring of 1968; by U.S. Senate studies issued by the Kennedy Subcommittee on Refugees; a paper prepared by a United Nations expert here; thousands of documents detailing deaths and material losses on file in Lao government offices; photos of bombed-out towns stored in the Lao Ministry of Information; and reports held by the American Mission here.

Although outside observers have been denied access to these Mission reports, reliable American sources who have read them say that they substantiate the widespread bombing of civilian targets.

Dispatch News International