

# **The Secret War in Viengxay**

*A background paper*

*By Dr Paul Rogers*

This paper focuses upon a remarkable network of caves at Viengxay in the North-East of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. It proposes their unique and special history has significant potential to serve as the basis for a major feature film and / or TV documentary. The paper also sets out a framework for topical and travel articles on Viengxay and Laos.

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The Annamite mountain range runs for hundreds of miles dividing the Lao PDR from Vietnam along the Indochina peninsular. Its dramatic landscapes, made up of thousands of limestone karsts, inaccessible ridges and valleys, provided the setting for a network of paths and tracks that made up the Ho-Chi Min Trail during the eleven-year Vietnam war.

Nestled in this mountain range some 300 km south-west of Hanoi is the small and picturesque town and district of Viengxay. Viengxay is remote and extremely poor – it's one of the poorest districts in a little known country that, second to Bangladesh, is the most impoverished in Asia. As practiced for generations, many of Viengxay's multi-ethnic people continue to etch their living from simple wooden huts by hunting with crossbows, weaving intricate textiles on elaborate looms, and growing rice on steep hillsides and in lush green paddies. Their basic existence in this stunning and fertile setting provides a wondrous contrast to many lives in the west. This contrast becomes even more fascinating when considered alongside the region's untold history.

For more than nine years the quiet tranquillity of Viengxay's humble existence was totally and brutally interrupted on a devastating scale. As the United States of America stepped up its efforts to halt the spread of communism across Indochina, Laos became caught up in a secret war that remains largely ignored in world history<sup>1</sup>. In 1962 events forced the Lao Communist party – the Pathet Lao – to flee from the capital in Vientiane across the enigmatic Plain of Jars (hundreds of 2,000 year old stone urns) and, in 1964, to take shelter and refuge in the limestone caves and inaccessibility of Viengxay.

The US Air Force General Curtis LeMay reportedly said America would bomb the Vietnamese and Laotian communists “back to the stone-age”. Viengxay became a key target for the might of the US Air-force, which unleashed a phenomenal and sustained bombardment<sup>2</sup>. Over two million tonnes of ordinance were dropped on Laos over the next nine years: more bombs than were dropped on Europe during the Second World War; an amount equal to ten tonnes per kilometre; or, one plane load of bombs every eight minutes, 24 hours per day, for nine years. To escape from this onslaught some 23,000 people took to Viengxay's 486 caves.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Warner's award winning book “Shooting at the Moon: the story of the CIA's clandestine war in Laos” provides a compelling and detailed account of the US offensive

<sup>2</sup> Laos was the USA's first experiment in high altitude aerial bombardment where only very limited numbers of special forces operate on the ground in the theatre of war

One of these people, now the director of a multi-national business, told me how she travelled by train from Paris to Hanoi in June 1971, to journey on to Viengxay to join the armed struggle. I wanted to ask a hundred questions, she plainly had many stories to tell. I asked if bombs were dropped on the caves everyday during her time there. Her beautiful chestnut-brown eyes didn't hesitate for a second. Exuding a calm strength, and with a hand softly but firmly and repeatedly striking the table, she replied, "Every minute, of every hour, of every day". I was taken aback by her answer and she paused for a second in my stunned silence. Her face then relaxed as she simply added, "Night-time was the only quiet time. When my two children were sick and weak with diarrhoea I carried them, seven kilometres in the dark, to the hospital cave and the Cuban doctors. I remember collapsing – exhausted in tears – scared that they were going to die".

Now, for the first time in the thirty years since the war ended, the government of the Lao PDR is opening up the Viengxay caves to international tourists – to explain what occurred over this astonishing period of world history, and help ensure future generations of Laotians understand their past. This move brings with it enormous opportunities – not least to produce a TV documentary or feature film for the world market. Either of these steps will make a huge contribution towards '*making poverty history*' for the people of Viengxay.

There are two key themes that might be portrayed in a film of this secret war. The first relates to the political history and the second to a story line woven together from personal accounts of everyday lives that were caught up in this living nightmare.

From the historical perspective, five different caves were selected as the family homes and offices of the key leaders of the Pathet Lao. Natural caves were enlarged, tunnels developed and artificial roofs built to keep water from dripping on people, clothes, tables, books and paper work. Airtight evacuation chambers with manual filter mechanisms to guard against gas attacks were constructed, along with five-foot thick blast walls to cover cave entrances and prevent rockets and guided missiles from entering. The responsibilities of a government in exile were divided and ministries set up in individual caves in separate locations. Printing presses, a fuel depot and light industry caves were established to support the war effort. A cave hospital complex was built to take care of the injured and dieing, and an underground theatre constructed to entertain soldiers and keep the compatriots happy. In this underground existence the leaders worked and planned with their Vietnamese counterparts to resist the colonial imperialists. Fidel Castro sent a Cuban delegation to the caves to lend his country's support. In 1973, when the Paris peace accords were finally signed, the leaders emerged from their hideouts to build houses in the fresh air immediately outside their caves – close enough to retreat underground should the peace talks stall.

Contrasting with factual political events and portrayals of illicit CIA financed guerrilla warfare<sup>3</sup>, the most appealing feature of any film might be to portray the lives of an ordinary yet heroic people caught up in their struggle for survival. During this nine years of living hell, families and communities organised themselves to live and farm by night. Monks set up temples for religious rites in caves. Caves were set aside for trading foodstuffs, for tailors to produce clothes, for education, for making farming tools. The full extent of this existence, the routine and exceptional stories that would provide a captivating context, and graphic personal

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<sup>3</sup> the CIA routinely traded in locally produced opium to finance local resistance against the Pathet Lao

focus of any film, have yet to be pieced together. Steps and activities are currently underway to interview survivors and record their stories and memoirs. These accounts will serve as material for museum exhibits and displays; they will also be recorded onto MP3 players and set against sound effects to enhance the interpretation of the caves. To develop film material there is a need to expand this documentary work and appoint a wider team of professional researchers and scriptwriters to work alongside a Laotian research team. The people of Viengxay's Samarkheyxay village are a priority interview group. This small village of 72 households is home to more than 50 partially and seriously disabled veterans of the conflict years – many of whom currently survive on less than \$1 per day, but greet visitors with million dollar smiles.

To carry the current work plan forward, the Lao government has requested SNV the Netherlands Development Organisation to advise on, and help develop, the tourism potential of the caves and surrounding area – a detailed strategy to achieve this aim has been set out and solid relations are in place at the national, provincial and district levels to facilitate its implementation<sup>4</sup>. Through this cooperation, agreements were signed in July 2006 with the UN World Tourism Organisation to implement two modest but ambitious ST-EP (Sustainable Tourism Eliminating Poverty) Projects. Key outputs of these projects are a heritage town master plan for Viengxay, an interpretation plan for the caves and the installation of many displays and related signage. Film material is envisaged to form a key component of an overall marketing and promotion plan.

A personalised visit to the Lao PDR and Viengxay, to fully assess the potential of this concept, and discuss planning options with the Lao government and local agencies, can be arranged by contacting Paul Rogers at [progers@snvworld.org](mailto:progers@snvworld.org)

The goal is to attract a substantial number of tourists to visit the stunning and picturesque landscapes of Viengxay – to witness for themselves this *hidden city* and remarkable network of *diamond caves*<sup>5</sup> that became the birthplace of the Lao PDR – and enjoy the warm and humbling hospitality of the kind Laotian people.

Working together there is an opportunity to lift the people of Viengxay out of poverty.

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<sup>4</sup> available at [www.snv.org.la/docseco.htm](http://www.snv.org.la/docseco.htm) - click on Houaphanh: a provincial tourism action plan

<sup>5</sup> *diamond caves* is translated from the Lao slogan “Na kham tham phet” – the reference to ‘diamonds’ refers to the clear and sharp minds of the leaders of the Pathet Lao