

Press Release  
Lao National Tourism Administration

### **Laos Opens Wartime ‘Cave City’ to Visitors**

VIENGXAY, LAOS, March 6, 2007 -- A collection of dramatic caves that provided shelter to 23,000 Laotians during nine years of aerial bombardment in the Indochina War, has now been opened to the public.

Between 1964 and 1973 Laos became caught up in a secret war that remains largely ignored in world history. Up to 480 caves in Viengxay district in Houaphanh province were transformed into a de facto cave city. The caves were used to house leaders and fighters of the Phathet Lao army. Many caves had specialist functions such as hospital, shop, school, printing house, government office, bakery and theatre. In the hospital cave, patients were treated by Cuban doctors.

Today, five of the caves are open to the public. More caves will open soon. The surrounding area is a remote and scenic province of karst mountains, tall waterfalls, hot springs and a protected forest that is home to tigers and leopards. The area is rich in ethnic villages, silk weaving and archaeological sites. In the surrounding hills villagers live in simple wooden huts. Some still hunt with crossbows. Some weave intricate textiles on elaborate looms. Many grow rice on steep hillsides or in lush green paddies.

“At the height of the bombing it was impossible to imagine that tourists would one day wish to visit this place to learn about our experience,” says Mr Phonekeo Latsachanh, who lived in one of the caves in Viengxay from 1964 to 1973. At the time he worked as an official in the cave designated as a trade office. “It’s important that Lao people can now tell foreigners their story,” he says.

Houaphanh province is the poorest in a country where 40% of the population survive on less than US\$1 per day. Locally, tourism is now being heralded as a vital tool in the fight against poverty. The development of Viengxay has the support of the Laotian government. The Prime Minister’s office has a permanent representative on the committee set up to oversee developments at Viengxay, the physical birthplace and spiritual cornerstone of modern-day Laos.

The Lao government has asked the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the Netherlands Development Agency (SNV) and the Asian Development Bank to develop the location as a tourist destination and world peace site that focuses upon poverty reduction and the needs of local people.

Over 20 tourism and heritage trainers have been brought in by international organisations to deliver practical advice that will help villagers benefit from the expected growth in tourism. Former war heritage sites such as the Cu Chi tunnels near Ho Chi Minh City

(Saigon) in Vietnam and the Killing Fields Memorial at Choeung Ek near Phnom Penh in Cambodia attract hundreds of international visitors daily.

The Lao government hopes to create similar interest in Viengxay where the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) is recording oral histories that visitors can listen to while they walk around the network of caves. The plan is to develop Viengxay as a national heritage town to be explored on foot.

“The Lao vision is to recreate the caves and tell the people’s story,” says UNWTO’s Dr Harsh Varma who believes events at the cave system were remarkable. “Viengxay was a triumph of ingenuity and comradeship in the face of what many historians believe was the longest and most intensive aerial bombardment in world history.”

However, visitors to this remote corner of northeast Laos must not expect an easy journey. While helicopters can be hired to Viengxay’s airstrip and the airport at Xam Neua, 29 kms away, the nearest airport with scheduled flights to Vientiane is Xieng Khouang, a six-hour drive from Viengxay.

An increasing number of budget travellers have been finding their way to Viengxay from both Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang on Laos’ public bus system. Some visitors prefer to be driven in from the Vietnamese border, 55 kms away. Viengxay is a 300-km or eight-hour drive from Hanoi, and four hours from Mai Chau in Vietnam – an increasingly popular mountain destination with many hill-tribes.

Accommodation in Viengxay reflects the township’s remote frontier status. There is one simple hotel with 16 rooms and three basic guest houses with a combined total of 26 rooms. Forty-five minutes away in Xam Neua, the provincial capital, there are three hotels offering a total of 45 rooms. Xam Neua has 16 guest houses.

“For tourists who take the time to reach Viengxay and the nearby attractions throughout northeast Laos, we can promise a very enriching and educational experience,” says Mr Somphong Mongkhonvilay, Chairman of the LNTA. “Viengxay will be an increasingly important part of the Northern Laos Heritage Route,” he says.

The Heritage Route Mr Somphong is referring to links the World Heritage site of Luang Prabang to Houaphanh and the mysterious Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang.

The LNTA is due to unveil plans for Viengxay’s ‘cave city’ development to international travel agents during the Lao Ecotourism Fair, July 26-29 in Vientiane. European film and TV documentary makers have already visited Viengxay and other programme makers are due to visit in the near future. In May, the UNWTO and SNV will help fund familiarisation trips for travel agents and foreign media.

With an average of only 10 visitors a day to the five open caves, Mr Siphon Vangduayang, Director of the Memorial Cave Office in Viengxay says: “We need more visitors. We had over 20,000 people living here all those years ago. We have room.”

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### **Journalists' resources**

High resolution photographs and a map of Viengxay and the surrounding area are available for download and reproduction at [www.ScottAsia.net/viengxay](http://www.ScottAsia.net/viengxay).

Information about the Lao Ecotourism Forum: [www.ecotourismlaos.com/forum2007.htm](http://www.ecotourismlaos.com/forum2007.htm)

Laos National Tourism Administration: [www.tourismlaos.gov.la](http://www.tourismlaos.gov.la)  
[www.ecotourismlaos.com](http://www.ecotourismlaos.com)

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World Tourism Organization (UNWTO): [www.unwto.org](http://www.unwto.org)  
Information on UNWTO's Sustainable Tourism - Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP) programme: [www.unwto.org/step/index.php](http://www.unwto.org/step/index.php).

Further reading: "The Secret War in Viengxay" a three-page briefing document by Dr Paul Rogers is available at [www.ScottAsia.net/viengxay](http://www.ScottAsia.net/viengxay).

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