



FACTS

REFUGEE RELIEF - VIENTIANE PLAIN
A Project of the USAID Mission to Laos

PHOTOGRAPHS

REFUGEES

OF THE

VIENTIANE PLAIN



On land set aside by the Royal Lao Government for the resettlement of refugees on the Vientiane Plain, the dark green of forests changes to the red earth of new roads that cut across the plain and the mosaic of rice fields and villages. Among the villages, many are new. The thatch of the roof is the color of straw; the houses are pale stripped bamboo, not yet weathered to the gray of the older villages. For about 30 miles east of the city of Vientiane and 60 miles north to the mountains that mark the boundary of the plain, the new villages appear at intervals, their geometric pattern in sharp contrast to the older settlements. Near each of the villages, the land is black where the grass and underbrush have been burned to clear a field for planting rice. The new villages are the first of those planned for the permanent resettlement of 27,000 refugees under conditions that will give them the opportunity to become self-supporting and to develop stable village economies. The Royal Lao Government has set aside 10 areas, a total of 79,000 hectares (195,062 acres) on the Vientiane Plain for this purpose.

Flight from the Plain of Jars begins with a run for the C-130 in the airlift which evacuated 15,000 people to the Vientiane Plain in February 1970.



In February 1970, 15,000 refugees from the Plain of Jars arrived on the Vientiane Plain. They occupied 17 temporary villages which the people who lived on the Vientiane Plain had built in preparation for their arrival. In March, their number increased to 24,000 as a result of the military action that followed the evacuation of the Plain of Jars. This period of temporary relocation was one of emergency relief for the survival of the refugees in an environment in which land had to be cleared before rice was planted, houses built for shelter, dispensaries for medical care, classrooms for children, wells drilled for water, and roads constructed to reach the refugee villages. By July 1970, there were 4,500 refugee families, 27,000 people living in 27 villages on the Vientiane Plain.

The permanent resettlement of these refugees is a project of the Ministry of Social Welfare of the Royal Lao Government with assistance from USAID; it is planned to extend over a three-year period. The project is multiple in scope. It has required temporary relocation and emergency relief for the refugees. For their re-

Refugees disembark from the C-130 at Wattay Airport, Vientiane, as the aircraft waits with idling engines to resume airlift operations.



settlement, it requires classifying agricultural land, surveying that land for village sites and rice fields, clearing land with heavy equipment and by hand, drilling wells, and constructing roads, houses, dispensaries and schools.

There are few large tracts of fertile land on the Vientiane Plain that are not already settled. Even on the fertile alluvial plain that borders the Mekong River, plots of relatively infertile land occur. The annual flooding of the Mekong destroys the rice crop if the waters reach high-flood level. To the north, tracts of infertile land are more frequent.

As the Royal Lao Government reserved an area for the resettlement of refugees, USAID sent in a land classification team to determine its agricultural potential. The team traveled by helicopter, a means of transportation that permitted 30 to 35 soil borings each day over an area of 1,200 hectares (2,963 acres) and which accelerated the land classification process. In April 1972, the team completed classification of the 79,000 hectares of land that make up the 10 areas reserved for the resettlement of refugees.

The temporary village of Ban Thin on the Nam Ngum River.



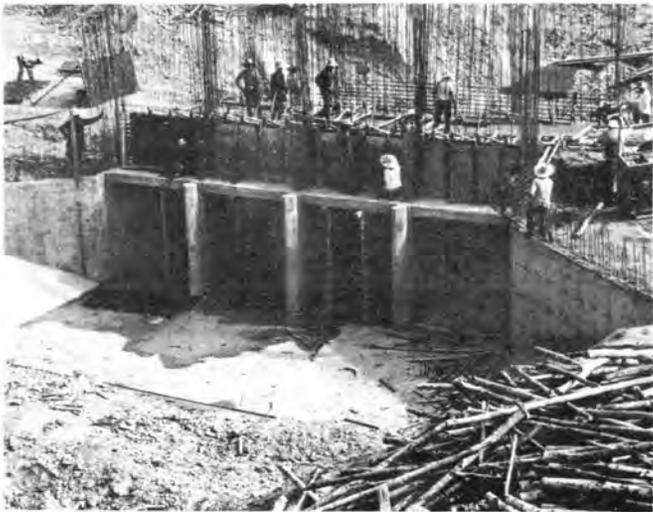
Refugees board trucks that will take them to the Vientiane Plain.

At their relocation sites, the refugees receive PL-480 commodities, household utensils, and farm tools.





Tractor-dozer moving earth during construction of culverts for flapgates.



One-way flapgates allow rainwater runoff and prevent inundation by the flooding Mekong River. The top of the structure is part of the roadway.



As most good lands are already under cultivation by indigenous farmers, the alternative is land reclamation. In Reserve Area 5, the Dong Kalume flood plain, which is one of the most fertile areas in Laos, stretches for about 12 miles along the Mekong River. Here, five flood gates and 13 miles of road dikes have been constructed to protect the 60 percent of the land that in the past has not been farmed because of flooding. This reclamation project has provided farm land for 3,000 refugees and will protect the land cultivated by over 6,000 indigenous farmers.

As the Royal Lao Government completes the legal and administrative work required to reserve land for refugees, survey teams stake out the boundaries of the reserve areas. The areas are numbered Area 1 through Area 10 in the order in which the Ministry of Social Welfare requested approval to establish them. A village for 70 families covers an area of 20 hectares (49 acres). The survey teams stake out the village streets, homes and garden plots, and an average 2-hectare (5 acre) plot of farmland for each refugee family. Within the village, each family receives the land which the village chief in the tradition of the Lao village designates for the family.

One of the 24 wells drilled on the Vientiane Plain since permanent resettlement of the refugees began.



As land development within an area begins, USAID and the Ministry of Social Welfare move in heavy equipment to clear land and build roads, chain saws to fell trees, and tractors to plow land. A division of labor builds a refugee village: on the one hand, the technicians who operate modern construction equipment; on the other, the refugees, who clear the land of roots and stumps, gather construction material in the forest, build their houses, schools, and dispensaries, construct paddy dikes, and plant their rice fields. In 7 of the 10 areas, over 2,000 refugee families, 19,000 people, now live in 58 villages on land that less than two years ago was forest and thick underbrush.

In many of these villages, people, who before their arrival on the Vientiane Plain were engaged for most part in subsistence agriculture, now acquire a minimal income through small enterprises. They cut and sell firewood; they weave and sell straw mats. Those who found bamboo on their land make and sell bamboo shingles for roofs and sidings of houses. In the Dong Kalume area, where USAID has introduced a sericulture project, 500 refugee families in 13 villages participate in the enterprise.

A Ministry of Social Welfare tractor plows land for planting rice.



Some of the heavy equipment used for road construction on the Plain.

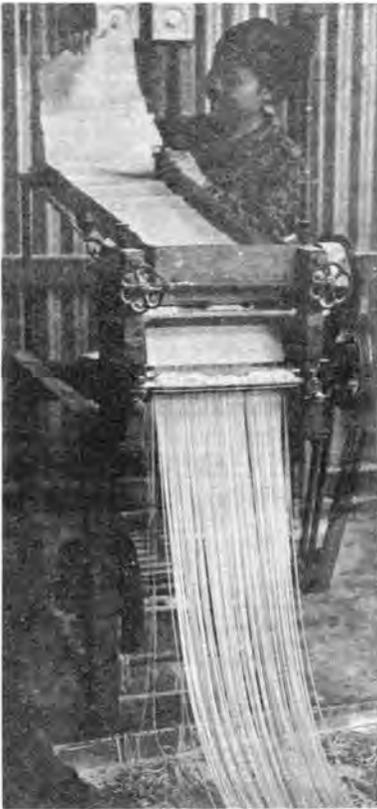


A refugee shapes poles for his house which will stand 5 feet above ground. BELOW: The permanent resettlement village of Vang Pheuang.





Rice for refugees is bagged at the USAID warehouse in Vientiane.



PL-480 flour and wheat soya blend (WSB) made into dry noodles at a plant in Vientiane.

Refugee families at Ban Tha Ngon receive PL - 480 cornmeal.



Expenditures for refugee resettlement on the Vientiane Plain fall into two broad categories:

Cost of commodities for refugee support during temporary relocation and initial phase of resettlement;

Cost of personnel and equipment for surveying and clearing farm land and village sites, drilling wells, and constructing roads, and construction materials for housing, schools and dispensaries.

The table lists the commodities provided under the first category and their costs.

RELOCATION & FOOD SUBSIDY COSTS

February 1970 - March 1972

\$ Thousand

<u>Commodity</u>	<u>Cost</u>
Rice	576
Salt ^{a/}	6
PL-480 food ^{b/}	249
Noodles	183
PL-480 cloth	6
Rice seed	13
Vegetable seed	8
Insecticide	3
Plastic sheets for shelter material	30
Hand tools	14
Mosquito nets	4
Blankets	13
Sleeping mats	3
Household utensils	27
Total	\$ 1,135

^{a/} Cornmeal, nonfat dried milk, vegetable oil, wheat flour, bulgur, wheat soya blend (WSB), corn soya milk (CSM).

^{b/} Manufactured in Vientiane from PL-480 flour and WSB.

Expenditures in the second category cover the cost of permanent resettlement from August 1970 (when this phase of the project began) through April 1972. Dollar expenditures total \$600,000 which cover the cost of heavy equipment used in clearing land and constructing roads and the purchase of commodities not locally available. Local currency expenditures total Kip 89,000,000 or \$370,833 which cover personnel costs and the purchase of local commodities.^{1/} These funds have been used

To construct 90 km (55.9 mi) of road of which 21 km (13 mi) are built to serve as dikes to protect the Dong Kalume flood plain;

To clear 23 village sites of 20 hectares (49 acres) each;

To drill 24 wells;

To provide construction materials for 2,200 permanent houses;

To provide construction materials for 18 permanent classrooms;

To construct 5 floodgates of reinforced concrete and 20 steel culverts on the Dong Kalume flood plain;

Costs to date of relocation, food subsidy, and permanent resettlement of 27,000 refugees averages out to \$78 per person.

The permanent resettlement of these refugees on the Vientiane Plain is beginning to prove a substantial economic asset to the area by bringing into production previously unproductive land and resources. The long-run potential is even greater.

^{1/}
Kip 240 = \$1.00, the official exchange rate until the unified conversion rate of Kip 600 = \$1.00 was established in April 1972.



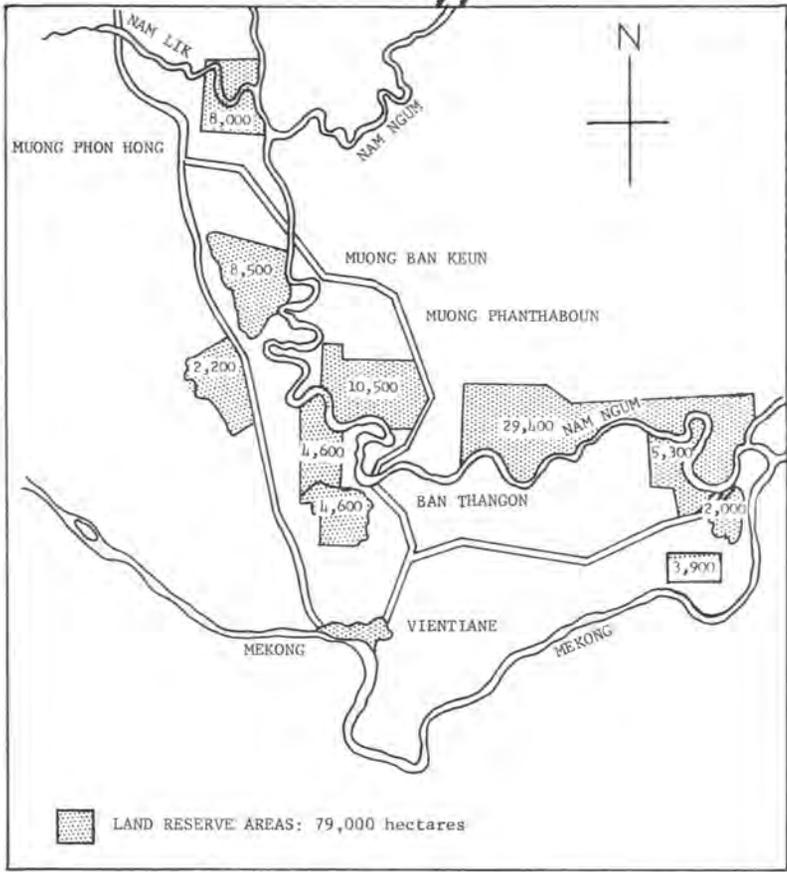
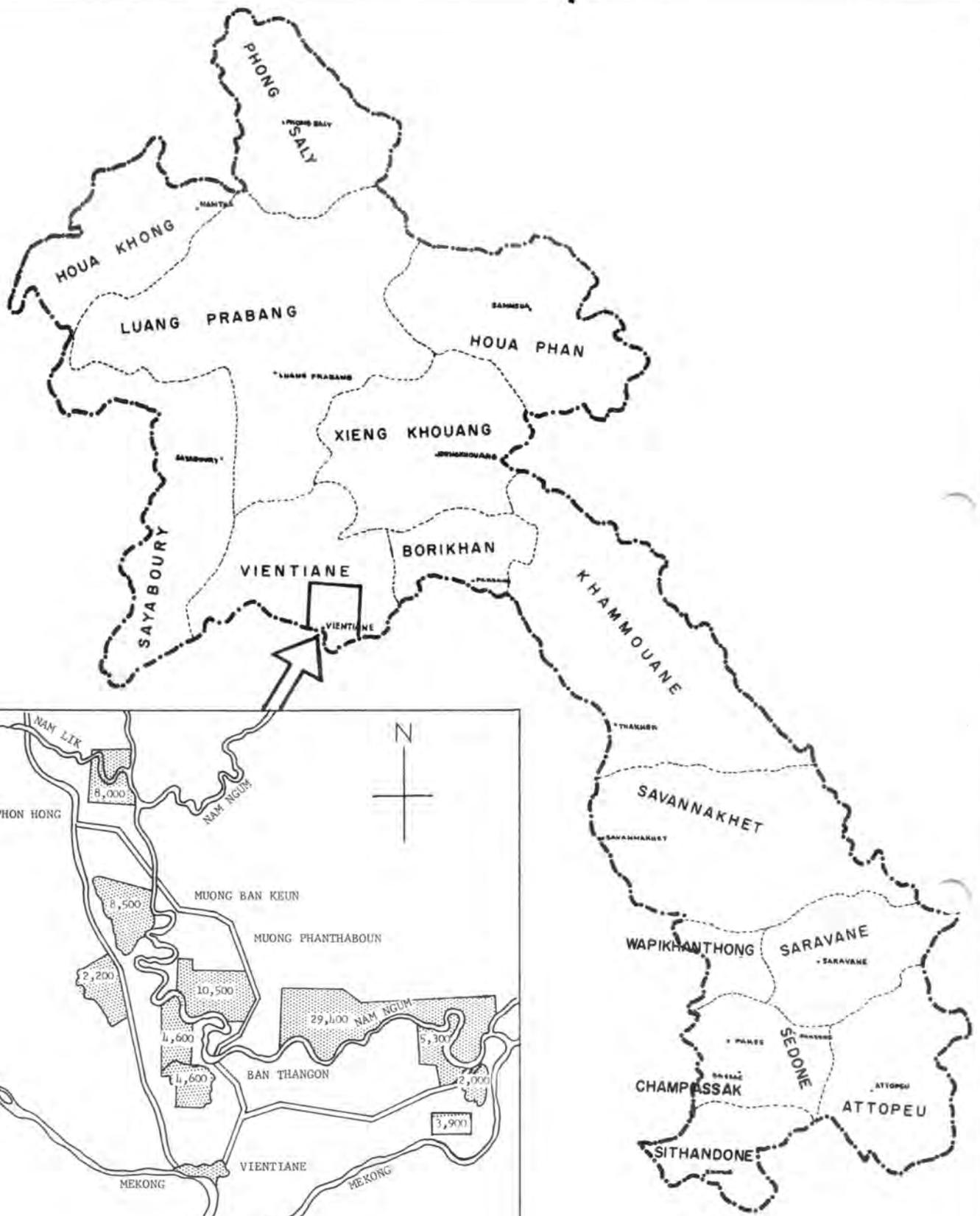
Making and selling woven bamboo mats, used for sidings of houses, provides income for some refugees.



Collecting and selling firewood is another source of income.

BELOW: Weaving colorful borders for skirts in the traditional manner.





Land Reserved for the Resettlement of Refugees on the Vientiane Plain