A Regional Approach: Mine and UXO Risk Reduction in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia

Andrew Wells-Dang

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal

Part of the Defense and Security Studies Commons, Emergency and Disaster Management Commons, Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol9/iss2/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.
A Regional Approach
MINE AND UXO RISK REDUCTION IN VIETNAM, LAOS AND CAMBODIA

Since Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have similar mine and unexploded ordnance risk problems, a regional approach may contribute to finding solutions for these three. Understanding common features and challenges is a first step to reducing the number of casualties in the region.

By Andrew Wells-Dang

2005 marks the 30th anniversary of the end of the conflict variously called, depending on the speaker’s perspective, the “Vietnam War,” “American War” or “Second Indochina War,” encompassing Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. All sides and observ ers agree the conflict was one of the most costly in world history in terms of loss of human life and use of military ordnance, including bombs and mines of all kinds. Thirty years later, while significant damage from this ordnance has taken place—first by regional governments, then through international non-governmental organizations, corporations and bilateral donors—landmines and unexploded ordnance still kill or maim over 1,000 people each year in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. All sides and observers agree the conflict was one of the most costly in world history in terms of loss of human life and use of military ordnance, including bombs and mines of all kinds. Thirty years later, while significant damage from this ordnance has taken place—first by regional governments, then through international non-governmental organizations, corporations and bilateral donors—landmines and unexploded ordnance still kill or maim over 1,000 people each year in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

UXO Versus AP Mine Contamination
The primary ofUXO contamination over that of anti-personnel mines is overwhelmingly prevalent in Laos and Vietnam, where national and local surveys have found that over 90 percent—and up to as high as 97 percent—of remaining ordnance in the ground consists of cluster bombs, grenades, aircraft bombs, shells, rockets and other UXO, not landmines. Laos, less commonly known is the fact that this is also true in most of Cambodia, where UXO casualties now exceed AP mine casualties by a factor of 2-3 to 1. The exception of the SI mine belt along Cambodia’s border with Thailand, the remainder of the country shows patterns of contamination quite similar to those in Laos and Vietnam.

In contrast to AP mines, which are “always on” and designed to explode at the slightest touch, many pieces of UXO appear inactive and may remain so until repeatedly touched or tampered with. Others are highly unstable and could respond differently to stimuli depending on the time and environment. Many pieces of ordnance can be handled repeatedly without exploding, but this offers no guarantee for the next person who encounters them. Cluster bombs—the ubiquitous BLU 26/36 “bom bies” dropped in immense quantities up and down the former Ho Chi Minh Trail and on other aerial bombing targets—are particularly sensitive to handling due to their fuse mechanisms.

Incidents involving UXO frequently claim multiple victims, as shrapnel may be scattered over a wide area, and cause upper-body injuries, burns, and/or blindness to survivors—a disparity divergent from the single-victim, lower-limb amputation contemplations of many AP mine expi sion. Furthermore, the pieces of UXO themselves are not left in material but can be found randomly. Facing no alternative, people continue to plant in UXO-contaminated fields, hunt and gather in contaminated forests and live in contaminated villages. When encountering UXO, they walk around, use local marking meth ors or move UXO to a more out-of-the-way location. Thus, UXO versus AP mine risk education messages such as “don’t touch,” “don’t move,” “report to the authorities” are neither appropriate nor effective in areas with UXO contamination. Local people have been touching and moving UXO for decades, and many feel (rightly or wrongly) they know how to do so safely. Moreover, there may not be authorities to report to, or if there are, they will not respond without payment and/or a long wait.

As a consequence, several international mine action organizations in Cambodia and Laos are experimenting with programs to involve villagers in clearance activities and in developing new MRE messages. “Village demining” or “villager-assisted clearance” remains controversial in the mine action community owing to safety (and liability) concerns and community education, by contrast, is widely accepted and formed a key part of discussions in the November 2004 regional workshop.

Tampering—The Main Cause of UXO Casualties
Shows that deliberate handling of ordnance with the goal of extracting metal and/or explosives. This is often referred to as, or lumped together with, scrap metal collecting. With no other employment options, adult males living in contaminated areas search for UXO, remove it from the ground and sell it to local dealers, who then remove the valuable metal and sometimes export. In some cases, children are also involved, either as passive observers or active participants. International organizations working in Savannakhet province, Laos, have documented recruitment of children to search for and remove scrap metal. Adults and children carrying heavy metal directors are a common sight along the Laos-Vietnam border and in other contaminated areas.

Reports from all three countries indicate that anywhere from 30 to 80 percent of UXO casualties result from tampering. The actual numbers may be even higher, as many survey respondents provide unlikely answers, such as “nothing happened—it just exploded,” that could be cover stories for tampering. Scrap-metal collecting is not illegal in itself, but handling of explosives is, and survivors may fear that they will not receive assistance if they admit to handling live ordnance. In any case, observers attribute the roughly 56 percent increase in casualties noted in 2004 to entirely increased tampering. The report from Phase I of the Vietnam national impact survey, being carried out by the Ministry of Defense Engineering Command in regard to the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, is expected to confirm these findings.

Given that tampering is an economic activity, why is it increasing at a time when economic development is occurring in the countries of Indochina as never before? The simpler answer is that some economic activity, particularly in rural areas are not benefiting equally from economic growth. The Vietnam national impact survey, being carried out by the Ministry of Defense Engineering Command in regard to the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, is expected to confirm these findings.

Given that tampering is an economic activity, why is it increasing at a time when economic development is occurring in the countries of Indochina as never before? The simpler answer is that some economic activity, particularly in rural areas are not benefiting equally from economic growth. Solutions must include economic and livelihood components as well as UXO-specific ones. Among the suggestions raised in the 2004 regional workshop were the following:

Expand common development strategies to other organizations working in the same areas; integrate MRE with economic development activities.
Share experiences and lessons learned by communities affected by UXO contamination and assist survivors visiting the homes of scrap dealers.
• Include scrap collectors in village MRE and mine action activities.
• Provide alternative vocational training and job placement services.

Need for Data-gathering and Assistance to New Survivors
From a public health and mine action perspective, current casualty risks in all three countries are relatively low in comparison to other injuries, especially road accidents.
should be conducted to better target MRE interventions. or inadequate, additional field surveys and mine marking...tinctly different problem. This applies as strongly to mine...risk education programs. To date, international donor funding for mine action and victim assistance has been spread quite unequally among the three countries. Cambodia has received an average of $20 million (U.S.) per year over the last five years, or roughly $2 per capita. Laos has received $5 million annually, or about $1 per capita. Vietnam has averaged $5–10 million, or about $0.10 per capita. This discrepancy appears likely to continue. For instance, Australia announced in July 2005 that it will provide $57 million for mine clearance and vic...of other ordnance had been looted, scavenged or taken as heirlooms. Much of this material was found there, the hazards they present...ground combat operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Almost immediately, they encountered vast stockpiles of conventional Iraqi munitions. Much of the ammunition was in pristine condition, while large amounts of other ordnance had been looted, scavenged or damaged during combat operations. It soon became apparent that a major effort would be required to secure and dispose of these stockpiles.

Although the much-publicized weapons of mass destruction have not been found in Iraq, less has been said about what munitions were found there, the hazards they present, or the efforts of Coalition Forces to remove the stockpiles. This article gives a first-hand view of the perils in Iraq.

Assessing and Managing the Problem

The discovery of these “aumo dumps” was not unexpected. Preparations to deal with captured enemy ammunition were part of the initial campaign planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom that started in October 2002. What was not appreciated until much later in 2003 was the scope of the problem. Ground commanders quickly put together plans and maneuvers in an attempt to secure or destroy the enormous caches of ammunition that units were uncovering. These well-intentioned efforts would eventually produce mixed results and, in some instances, amplify the problem.

Increased awareness but uncertainty of the magnitude of the captured enemy ammunition (CEA) problem resulted in the United States Army Corps of Engineers requesting to conduct an assessment in June/July 2003 to determine if their existing munitions remediation programs could bring aid. Specifically, Combined Joint Task Force 7 (CJTF-7) sought assistance in the munitions collection process, the transportation of the ordnance to disposal areas and the operation of the demolition sites themselves. Due to the perceived urgency of the situation, CJTF-7 wanted capability in place within 30 days of the assessment to begin reducing or replacing military personnel and equipment engaged in the CEA mission (now renamed the Coalition Munitions Clearance program). Combined Joint Task Force 7—the “customer”—wanted the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and its contractors to provide a “cradle-to-grave” service that could eventually be transferred over to Iraqi authorities. Funding was provided to the Corps of Engineers on 28 July 2003 to commence CEA operations. USACE awarded several contracts on 8 Aug. 2003—one to the Parsons Corporation (Pasadena, Calif.) for $80 million (U.S.) to provide the logistical support for the overall effort, and three contracts worth $67 million each to the following unexploded ordnance contractors: Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technologies (Knoxville, Tenn.), Tetra Tech-Foster Wheeler (Pasadena, Calif.), and USA Environmental, Inc. (Tempe, Ariz.). The scope of work for the contractors included the following requirements:

• Manage ammunition supply points/collection points (ASPCP).
• Perform demolition of unaremoscible munitions.
• Perform transportation of CEA from caches to ammunition supply points/collection points or demolition areas as required and transport prepared demolition loads of CEA from ASPCP to the demolition area.
• Perform other activities such as battery trays, enablement of unconventional warfare devices, site investigations, evaluations and responses in support of the CEA mission.

Among the populations most at risk are the poorest, ethnic minority groups and those living in remote areas—which are often overlapping categories.

Doi: George Zajczewski Ret. U.S. Army

n 20 March 2003, United States and Coalition Forces crossed the border into Iraq, initiating ground combat operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Almost immediately, they encountered vast stockpiles of conventional Iraqi munitions. Much of the ammunition was in pristine condition, while large amounts of other ordnance had been looted, scavenged or damaged during combat operations. It soon became apparent that a major effort would be required to secure and dispose of these stockpiles.
Endnotes and References

Mine Free: Not Anytime Soon, Kidd [from page 4]

Endnotes

Demining in Iraq, Banks [from page 8]

Endnotes
1. USAID World Service is the services arm of ERI International. MAI is the ERI mine action company presently operating with several other ERI companies in the Islamic Republic of Iran.
2. More work in Iraq is for a national disarm. International donors demand IMA standards and international quality assurance/quality control commitment to impact work.
4. Embarkments are to contain fresh water. Rucks are generally used to describe defensive positions, banks of earth and embarkments.
5. Rucks are used on the banks to search for any hazardous material that may be dug up.

Assisting Landmine Accident Survivors in the Thai-Burma Border Region, Matthee [from page 11]

Endnotes
2. While only governments can sign the convention, non-state actors can sign the Declaration of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action through an organization called Geneva Call. Geneva Call engages NGOs to respect and adhere to humanitarian norms, starting with the anti-personal mines ban. For more information, see http://www.genevacall.org/home.htm. Accessed Nov. 2, 2005.
3. Simple ploughs make a shallow loung, which is a reference line guided by a wire or cord weighted at the end with a large weight known as a plough bob. It is used to ease a reference line for creating vertical lines.

A Regional Approach: Mine and UXO Risk Reduction in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Wells-Dang [from page 14]

Further Reading

Endnotes
2. While only governments can sign the convention, non-state actors can sign the Declaration of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action through an organization called Geneva Call. Geneva Call engages NGOs to respect and adhere to humanitarian norms, starting with the anti-personal mines ban. For more information, see http://www.genevacall.org/home.htm. Accessed Nov. 2, 2005.
3. Simple ploughs make a shallow loung, which is a reference line guided by a wire or cord weighted at the end with a large weight known as a plough bob. It is used to ease a reference line for creating vertical lines.

Minne Free: Not Anytime Soon, Kidd [from page 18]

Endnotes

Hidden Killers in Afghanistan, Sharifi [from page 20]

Endnotes

Observations on Recent Changes in Northwest Cambodia’s Mine/UXO Situation, Simmonds, et al. [from page 24]

Endnotes
1. LBS is an abbreviation for Local-Specific One that is commonly used in Cambodia. This one is not to be confused with LBS (Landmine Impact Survey), which is common in use in most other parts of the world.

USDA’s Perspective: The Importance of Social and Economic Developing Strategies for Humanitarian Mine Action, Feinberg [from page 35]

Endnotes

Endnotes
1. From the 2004 Nairobi Declaration by States Parties to the Ottawa Convention.
4. On Sept. 18, 2005, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 55/2, the United Nations Millennium Declaration. At the United Nations Millennium Summit, world leaders agreed to a set of eight broad and meaningful goals and targets for combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women. Placed at the heart of the global agenda, they are now called the Millennium Development Goals. The Summit’s Millennium Declaration also outlined a wide range of commitments in human rights, good governance and democracy. See also the United Nations: declaration/aos/05a.pdf. Accessed Nov. 4, 2005.

Integrated Mine Action: A Rights-Based Approach in Cambodia, Campbell [from page 45]

Endnotes

References