

The U.S. Humanitarian Demining Program: Engagement in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand

The Humanitarian Demining Program is working with U.S. government agencies and NGOs to provide mine awareness training, mine clearance, clearance training, medical services and the latest in demining technology to mine-affected nations.

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The U.S. Humanitarian Demining Program (USHDP) seeks to relieve human suffering while promoting U.S. interests. The program's objectives are to establish and support sustainable indigenous demining programs, reduce civilian casualties, create conditions for the return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes, reinforce the stability of affected countries, and encourage international cooperation and participation. USHDP is a comprehensive effort supporting mine action initiatives including: mine awareness, the clearance of priority land, training host country deminers, reviewing and accelerating promising technologies, and medical and rehabilitative assistance to survivors of landmine accidents.¹

On Sept. 13, 1993, the National Security Council established an Interagency Working Group (IWG) on landmines and demining. The implementation of this directive resulted in the establishment of core concepts for the USHDP. The IWG on Humanitarian Demining is charged with identifying which countries receive U.S. demining assistance and managing U.S. resources committed to the program.

The United States seeks to tailor each program to the needs of each nation and often works in cooperation with international agencies and host governments of mine-affected states all over the world. The United States supports mine clearance operations and mine awareness programs by providing training, expertise and equipment support through programs of the U.S. Department of Defense. Support also comes from funding, training and operations provided by commercial organizations or NGOs. In countries where a direct U.S. military training mission is not necessary, the United States contributes to programs

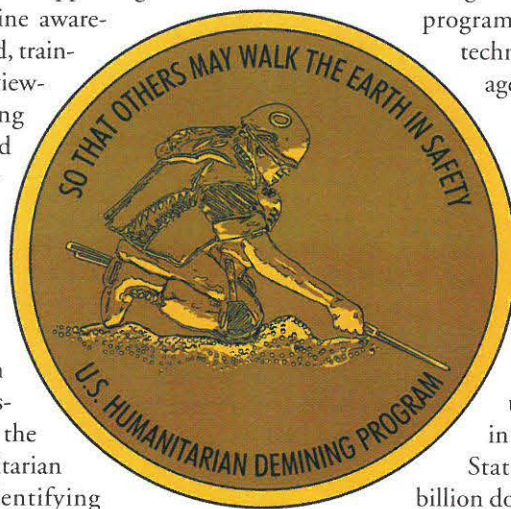
administered by the United Nations, the Organization of American States, or the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID).

A mine-affected country in need of aid can request United States assistance via the U.S. embassy in that country. The embassy reviews the request and forwards it to the IWA on Humanitarian Demining in Washington D.C. The IWA is responsible for approving, developing and coordinating U.S. humanitarian demining policy and programs. Its members include policy and technical experts from several government agencies.

The IWG is chaired by the U.S. Department of State and vice-chaired by the Department of Defense. Other members include the National Security Council, USAID and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). To date, the United States has assisted 37 different country programs around the world, including demining efforts in Kosovo and Somaliland. The United States has contributed nearly a half a billion dollars to the eradication of landmines.

U.S. Activities in Asia

There are 16 mine-affected nations in Asia.² The United States currently has four programs within South Asia: Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and, most recently, Vietnam. Most of these South Asian demining programs have been established within the past five years, but are already saving lives and improving what could be considered dangerous living conditions. Southeast Asia has an extensive UXO and landmine problem that the United States is committed to eradicating.



VIETNAM

The United States has supported the NGOs presence in Vietnam for many years, building the framework for improved U.S.-Vietnam relations. A formal demining program for Vietnam was approved in June 2000, allowing greater U.S. assistance and further demining initiatives. USAID alone has provided Vietnam with over \$5 million (U.S.) used for various initiatives in order to assist with the development of Vietnamese programs and insuring the economic stability and indigenous support for the programs created.

U.S. Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR) funds were allocated in 1998 and 1999 to Vietnam for the establishment of a mine awareness and training center. The MAIC at JMU was chartered by the State Department Humanitarian Demining Program Office in 1999 to develop a mine awareness program in Vietnam. The goals of the program were to develop mine awareness education knowledge, teach requisite management skills, and implement a rudimentary mine awareness campaign with the government and the people of Quang Tri province, Vietnam.

The mine awareness program operations were developed in accordance with Vietnam's National Plan for Sustainable Development from 1991 to 2000. The overall goal of the project was to influence the behaviors, perceptions and attitudes of families living in Quang Tri, thus allowing them to escape or minimize the effects of latent unexploded munitions by providing appropriate knowledge and techniques to the children and families of the region. This methodology was selected because it used an iterative building block approach that utilized maximum support of, and ongoing collaboration and cooperation with, the People's Committee officials, the Women's Union and the Committee for the Care and Protection of Children representatives, and the people of the province. To the extent that its goals were achieved, the project was successful because each component activity was conducted within the context of a working partnership with the host nation populace.

In 2000, over \$1.7 million was contributed to Vietnam for the start up of a humanitarian demining center, in addition to demining and mine awareness equipment. The United States is also supporting a Level One Survey in Vietnam to record the severity of landmine and UXO infestation, and to better formulate a plan of action. In 2001, the United States plans to allocate more than \$2 million to support mine action in Vietnam.

The U.S. government is ready to continue to support the large NGO population present in Vietnam, but is now

The U.S. Humanitarian Demining Program

assisting with the start up of the newly approved U.S.-Vietnamese Humanitarian Demining Program. With more opportunities to help fund landmine/UXO clearance, provide mine awareness and victims' assistance, while building cooperative relationships, Vietnam will soon be along the path to saving lives and healing the wounds caused by past conflict.



LAOS

Intense combat from 1964 to 1973 in Laos led to the extreme UXO situation present there today. The primary threat to civilians in Laos is UXO, not AP mines, though both are present. Two million tons of ordnance were dropped on Laos, of which 30 percent is unexploded. Over half of the country is plagued with UXO today. The most contaminated areas are northern provinces like Houaphan and Xieng Khouang and the eastern border, which had been heavily bombed. These weapons continue to kill people more than 25 years after the original conflict.

The United States has been assisting Laos since 1995. Over \$14 million has been provided for humanitarian demining projects, mine awareness programs and victims' assistance, via the Department of Defense, State Department and USAID. The United States is the largest contributor to the UXO/landmine relief in Laos, providing over 25 percent of its total contributions. The United States has had an active role in UXO Lao programs since 1996, and has also been its single largest donor. Funds contributed by the United States maintain mine/UXO awareness in eight provinces, mine/UXO clearance in seven others, and created rapid response teams in the remaining five. In 1996 and 1997, U.S. money helped established UXO Lao and fund training for UXO clearance, community mine awareness and medical care for UXO Lao personnel. The Nam Suang UXO Training Center was also supported by the United States and staffed by Lao instructors. This center

JMU staff prepare Women's Union members to conduct a mine action survey. c/o MAIC

offers courses in community awareness, clearance techniques, medical training and leadership development. By the end of 1999, U.S. military contingents had trained more than 815 indigenous personnel and created a self-sustaining training capacity. The U.S. trained deminers have destroyed more than 100,000 pieces of UXO and 43 landmines.

Through international donations and support, 300 medical staff personnel have received training in emergency rehabilitation and laboratory services. One provincial and five district hospitals have received medical equipment and supplies. The United States and others within the international humanitarian demining community will continue to support the well-rounded and effective UXO Lao program.

CAMBODIA

Cambodia's landmine and UXO problem was caused by two decades of war. Four million to 6 million landmines on 3,000 km² of land compose the threat that 23 Cambodian provinces suffer. There is a minimum of 50 casualties a month attributed to landmines. In addition to the devastating physical and medical problems landmine and UXO accidents cause, socioeconomic ramifications are also increasing. War Child has reported that without this landmine problem "agricultural production could increase ... 135 percent in Cambodia."⁸

In 1997, the United Nations trained 537 Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) engineers resulting in the demining of 800,000 sq. m of viable land along a major highway. Cambodia has received equipment from the U.N. Development Program Trust Fund and over \$23 million in NADR funds from the United States. The United States



Two mines found within a mine clearance lane. c/o USHDP

has provided training for 1,200 personnel in basic demining techniques, leadership, medical skills and mine awareness. Mine clearance operations led to the reconstruction of a road and bridge, opening access to a chief city for the first time in 20 years.

The Cambodian Red Cross Mine Incident Database has been a huge project initiated by the NGOs. The information entered into this database will further help the humanitarian demining cause of Cambodians. Further initiatives by the Rural Planning Committees and the RCAF, with the contributions from the United States led to the establishment of the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC). CMAC, with the help of the United States and other international donors, has reduced the casualty rate from landmines by 90 percent. Still, one in 45 Cambodians is an amputee, presenting a new problem facing this landmine-scourged society.

USAID has invested over \$6.8 million in the Cambodia Prosthetics and Rehabilitation Program since 1992. USAID money also goes to support the Disability Action Council and VVAE, to assist landmine victims by expanding rehabilitation and job training programs, and by strengthening the institutions that Cambodian society needs to sustain such programs. These programs have produced and fitted 635 multi-axle feet and 1,300 thermoplastic prostheses and treated 8,000 patients.

THAILAND

Thailand's landmine problem is the result of past internal insurgencies, as well as armed conflicts with neighboring countries. There are an estimated 100,000 landmines located along Thailand's borders with Cambodia, Burma, Laos and Malaysia. Those mines are on approximately 900 sq. km of land and affect 18 provinces.

The United States first provided Thailand with a provisional \$1.7 million in 1999. The provisional money funded a demining school for mine awareness classes in

Lop Buri, a facility for basic demining in Ratchaburi, while also providing essential demining equipment. Since 1999 the United States has provided nearly \$5 million to Thailand's humanitarian demining efforts. U.S. Special Forces contingents have trained more than 100 Thai deminers to international standards. Thailand's Mine Action Center (TMAC) was officially dedicated in January 2000 and demining activities actually began later that year in July. TMAC will become a key instrument to further humanitarian demining assistance and mine clearance initiatives in Thailand. Within the past year the U.S. and Thai governments have decided to initiate a Mine Detecting Dog Program. RONCO Consulting Company has been contracted to provide support for the Dog Program in Thailand beginning in 2001. Mine detecting dog programs have been successful in many other countries, increasing mine clearance productivity while also insuring greater safety for both deminers and demining dogs.

Future for Demining

The future for demining efforts looks bright for Southeast Asia. International cooperation, NGO support and U.S. assistance supports productive work within Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. More equipment, funds and mine action is planned for 2001 within each of these countries, saving more lives and eradicating the dangerous evidence of conflicts from the past. The United States plans to assist NGO projects in Cambodia, help provide more equipment and protective gear for demining efforts there, and continue to support (via UNDP) the work done by CMAC. Laos is continuing its demining efforts and the United States will make equipment provisions and support the Lao Trust Fund. Thailand's dog program will have the backing of the United States, while Sa Kaew and HMAU put new demining equipment to positive use. Vietnam has continual NGO demining assistance, but since its approval for a formal demining program support and future demining efforts will accelerate.

The United States has never been more committed to the landmine and UXO scourge in Southeastern Asia. The United States will continue to support the indigenous mine action efforts of countries already receiving U.S. assistance, and will review new requests for assistance from neighboring UXO and landmine infested nations. Remarkable successes have been achieved in mature programs like Cambodia and Laos, and the new programs in Thailand and Vietnam. Hopefully, one day in the future, stability and cooperation can reign over the whole Southeast Asia landmine crisis. ■

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Mine clearance project in Cambodia where mine fields are often in the paths of civilians. c/o USHDP

CMAC Mine Awareness class in session. c/o USHDP

