Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 5
Issue 1 The Journal of Mine Action

April 2001

Myanmar

Country Profile

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Recommended Citation

Profile, Country (2001) "Myanmar," Journal of Mine Action : Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 33. Available at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol5/iss1/33

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LAOS

People's Democratic Republic

HISTORY

The first united kingdom of Laos, Lan Xang, was established in June 1354, when Fa Ngum was crowned king. The kingdom covered much of modern Thailand. In 1690, Lan Xang fell to a series of invasions and was split into three kingdoms. It was not reunited again until 1899, when France joined upper and lower Laos as part of French Indochina. Laos gained official independence from France in 1949, but the growth of communist and anti-communist factions prevented the formation of any unified government until 1975.

A protracted civil war broke out in 1960 between the Pathet Lao, a communist faction headed by the North Vietnamese and government forces backed by the Thai and South Vietnamese. In 1973, a ceasefire was reached, and a new coalition government was formed. The Pathet Lao gained control in 1975 after a series of communist victories in Vietnam and Cambodia. The Pathet Lao established the first Laos People's Democratic Republic.

LANDMINES/UXO OVERVIEW

Laos is not known to produce or export AP mines. It is thought that Laos does maintain a stockpile of mines, but the amount is unknown. There is no evidence of recent use of AP mines by Lao or Lao military. Although there are AP mines present in Laos, the primary threat to civilians is UXO. Bombing during the Indochina War, especially from 1964-1973, resulted in the release of tons of cluster bomb units that did not explode on impact as planned. There is an unknown number of UXO in Laos, estimated by various sources to be between 500,000 and several million. Handicap International (HI) reported in 1997 that over 3,800 villages, with a population of 1.3 million, have been affected by UXO and mines. The serious landmine problem causes not only the risk of casualty, but it also affects Laos by adding time, expense and hazard to new economic development. Land denial and barriers to development are pressing issues. The UXO problem has profound effects on food production, infrastructure development, water and sanitation, school and hospital additions, and other important economic development.

CASUALTIES

A survey done by HI in early 2000 stated that from 1973-1996, there were 1371 casualties from landmine accidents and 9,473 victims of UXO accidents. During the first four years after the war, an average of three accidents occurred per day. The number has now dropped to an average of 240 accidents per year.

DEMOLISH

In 1996, the government established a national office, the UXO Lao, to coordinate UXO clearance and awareness and implement a national UXO strategy and demining projects. UXO Lao is one of the nation's largest employers, with over 1,000 employees. There are several programs involved in mine/UXO clearance in Laos. MAG, HI, NPA, World Vision Australia, Gerbera and MIISearch all support demining efforts in Laos. In 1999, 622 hectares of land were cleared, and 90,000 mines were destroyed. In addition, 178,846 people were provided with UXO awareness information. More than 951,000 people benefited from the operations. UXO Lao had set target goals for 2000 to clear 1,005 hectares of land in 857 villages, destroying approximately 100,000 UXO. They also have plans to visit more than 759 villages with mine awareness programs for over 190,000 people.

REALITY CHECK

A press release from the Lao Human Rights Council Inc., details reports in Laos that the Russian and Vietnamese governments have been supplying the Lao with “biological and chemical weapons.” The weapons have been used to kill Hmong and Laotians in Laos since the end of the Vietnam War. Reports indicate that the Lao Communist government has used biological and chemical weapons to kill more than 50,000 people in Laos since 1975.

LANDMI NES/UXO OVERVIEW

Laos is the headquarters of AP mines. Currently ruled by a military government known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The 30 ethnic groups fighting against the SPDC are believed to possess the knowledge and supplies to construct landmines and improvised explosive devices, though only 10 groups are known to be mine users. Two stockpiles, numbering in the thousands, are in the hands of ethnic militias. Of Myanmar's 14 states and divisions, 10 are mine-infested, with concentrations in eastern Myanmar.

CASUALTIES

Estimates of landmine casualties in 1999 place the number at 1,500. In 1994, the U.S. Department of State estimated that landmines produced 1,500 victims per year, which suggests that the number of landmine victims per year has remained at a high level for the past five years. Statistics from Karen State, from 1998, report that it produces nearly one civilian landmine amputee per day. Reports also state that 30 percent of landmine victims die prior to any medical care.

DEMOLISH

There are no humanitarian demining operations in Myanmar, though some of the ethnic groups have cleared mines. The Myanmar Red Cross is considering developing a landmine awareness program.

REALITY CHECK

In attempts to overthrow the SPDC, armed ethnic parties have waged violent struggles. With no end in sight, the consequences of these conflicts are mounting. Tatmadaw units, active near Myanmar's border with Thailand, have been charged with making local civilians walk through suspected mine fields to trigger the bombs. This gruesome tactic, known as "human mine sweeping," is not limited to the Tatmadaw militia. Reports in late 1999 and early 2000 indicate that human mine sweeping is occurring in Karen State during military assaults on Shan State army locations and during operations against army bases in the Tenasserim Division.

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Published by IMU Scholarly Commons, 2001