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Restoring the Spirit of Asia's Most Mine Affected Countries

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Restoring the Spirit of Asia's Most Mine Affected Countries

The various wars and internal conflicts have left the civilians of Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam in serious need of assistance. Today, several organizations are increasing their aid to mine victims by addressing both their physical and socio-economic needs.

**Cambodia**

In 1975, after Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime came to power, Cambodia faced one of the worst genocides the world has ever witnessed. During the regime's brief tenure, which spanned the years of 1975–1979, an effort to create a classless utopian society has resulted in the deaths of several million people. The Khmer Rouge's first priority was to establish a gas chamber and a Cambodian volleyball league for the disabled.

**Vietnam**

In 1991, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF) established a humanitarian program in Cambodia to provide rehabilitation assistance to landmine victims. Since then, the programs and services offered have grown from a small three-person operation to a comprehensive network of centers nationwide. Today, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation has extended its reach throughout Asia, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

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**Restoring the Spirit**

**A Day of Hope and Survival Assistance**

by Hayden Roberts, MAIC

Introduction

Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam have much in common. However, one similarity often overlooked is that all three of these countries are carpeted by millions of landmines and UXO that have left civilians in a constant state of fear. From the killing Fields in Cambodia to the mines laid by government and rebel forces in eastern Burma to the leftover mines of the Vietnam War, an ever-present human rights crisis exists within this area. Fortunately, in the wake of this crisis, many organizations have stepped up to face the problem by offering a wide variety of services and assistance programs to victims.

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Located in the small town of Mae Sor near the border of Burma, as many Burmese often stumble hopelessly across landmines, either within Burma or during their trek to Thailand, many mine victims that have been found can be found in this region with the capability to treat this type of trauma is the Mae Tao Clinic.

Due to the lack of adequate provisions as well as the depletive medical infrastructure in the border region of Burma, many mine victims do not make it to medical facilities before they die. In addition to this, the cost of amputation or corrective surgery at other local Thai hospitals is more than twice the annual wage of most refugees. Clear Path International recognized this alarming rate and decided to act. Not only has Clear Path International done so and provided free medical assistance to Burmese refugees as well as dental and eye care services, but a Burmese camp in MaEo has also opened a new prosthetic shop in MaEo.

Additionally, with the help of volunteers such as Dr. Tooawan Gert, a pediatrician and prosthetist, the clinic has attempted to expand Mae Tao has been provided for. Clear Path hopes to support the addition of a 10-bed ward for survivor rehabilitation, materials for the production of 100 prosthetic devices, training of five new prosthetists (mine victims themselves), and funding for orthopedic surgery and a risk-reduction education program for medical technicians and refugees returning to Burma.

The Vietnamese government estimates that there are some 2,000 UXO/mines related casualties a year.  

Handicap International (HI)  

According to their website report: Handicap International, World Report 2003, “Handicap International has assisted since 1989 along the Thai-Burma border on behalf of disabled people, mainly through the provision of prosthetic and orthopedic devices and community-based rehabilitation programs.”

This organization acknowledged the large number of refugees who are amputees or have other severe injuries and targeted them in their victim assistance programs. To better serve those who are in need of rehabilitation, HI opened nine orthopedic workshops in provincial hospitals or refugee camps throughout Thailand. On average, the workshops produce about 40 prostheses a month. A wheelchair distribution program in Bangkok is implemented under the auspices of HI and many of the workshops throughout Thailand receive this type of equipment. As it is primarily the provincial hospitals that have been adequately equipped for the rehabilitation of victims and amputees, HI-Thailand will continue its community-based rehabilitation program in selected mine-affected villages of the Tak province.

Vietnam  

For over 20 years now, Vietnam has witnessed a long-term era of peace after several decades of turmoil and strife. The largest conflict was the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975 and left this nation decimated and covered with millions of landmines. To illustrate this point, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has estimated that there are some 3.5 million landmines and 350,000-800,000 tons of UXO scattered throughout Vietnam.

A project to expand the disabled population in this region to over 300,000 was started in 1995 in order to meet the needs of those too poor to travel. As Van Tan has set up two centers in Vietnam that have the capacity to produce about 200 prostheses a month for less than $50 apiece.

Physical aid and therapy are not the only aspects of assistance provided by VNAH—promoting national policy and legislation to acknowledge the disabled by the government is a large area of focus as well. VNAH has started a program that will work alongside the Vietnamese government to improve and update policies and programs for the disabled. VNAH work in this area has paid off and now Vietnam has its first comprehensive Ordinance on Disabled Persons. The main priorities of this policy are to ensure barrier-free access, create employment opportunities and create groups of aid for the disabled.

VNAH  

According to VNAH statistics, the country of Vietnam contains over five million people with a disability and is a nation with one of the world’s lowest incomes. In order to counter and address this fact, VNAH has been manufacturing and delivering limbs and braces to those in need. To date, over 33,000 devices have been delivered, although there are still many war victims that have not been assisted. VNAH handles this by conducting outreach missions in rural communities too far from hospitals and prosthetic centers in order to meet the needs of those too poor to travel.”

Restoring the Spirit

A young boy awaits having his prosthetic fitted.

A Thai boy learning to function with the help of his prostheses.
Wheelchairs

With regards to the distribution and quality of wheelchairs in Vietnam, VNHA has made a great deal of progress. Over 4,000 wheelchairs have been distributed and the organization sees to it that high-priority cases, such as double amputees and stroke victims with polio, can own and operate these devices. Through grants and other monetary assistance, the organization has been able to provide technical assistance to manufacturers to improve design and the overall production of wheelchairs. VNHA has donated wheelchairs to the disabled in the central and southern region of Vietnam and hopes that their aid can expand to other areas in southeast Asia.

UNICEF

Working alongside national governments and other humanitarian agencies, UNICEF strives to accomplish many goals related to the protection of children worldwide. This organization takes on issues such as poverty, human rights, and health care to ensure children around the world have the opportunity to reach their utmost potential. As the severity of the landmine problem in Vietnam has come to light, UNICEF has observed that the children of Vietnam are considered at great risk from the threat of landmines and UXO. UNICEF has begun to take action to launch programs directed at this vulnerable demographic group.

Much of this focus is aimed at the population of Quang Tri, which is found along the old dividing line between the former North and South Vietnam. UNICEF has taken great lengths to address the issue of childhood disability by advocating government policy aimed at supporting the needs of the disabled by offering community-based rehabilitation programs. These community programs operate in 45 out of 61 provinces. The National Institute for Educational Sciences (NIES) project has worked with UNICEF to help facilitate the integration of people with disabilities into society and provide for the education and development of disabled children. UNICEF also has been involved in the following projects:

* "Launching a new program this year to reduce the prevalence of casualties from bombs, landmines and other ordnance across the country.

* Supporting the production and airing of television and radio spots in numerous affected provinces throughout the country.

* Supporting the dissemination of UXO/mining warning signs in affected areas, (as well as) information dissemination activities through existing health care networks, peer education activities for children and youth, and expanding inclusive education activities to provide additional opportunities for disabled children to attend school and increase school attendance activities.*

**Conclusion

At epidemic rates, landmines and UXO have claimed the health and livelihood of millions throughout southeast Asia. As the victim toll has increased to alarming proportions, many organizations have taken it upon themselves to assist these nations in any means possible. Although landmines have taken hope away from these victims, these organizations have given those disadvised people a chance to start again and lead a more productive life. "That's what it's all about," says Van Tran states. "We not only need to heal the physical wounds, but deal with the emotional scars as well, and restore where hope was once."

**Endnotes

1. Vietnam-Victims of America Foundation
4. Vietnam Victims of America Foundation
6. "Vietnam-Victims of America Foundation
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9. "Vietnam Victims of America Foundation
11. "Vietnam-Victims of America Foundation

**All photos courtesy of Clear Path International

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United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
Website: http://www.unicef.org/about/contact.htm

by Dr. Philippe Chabasse, Co-director, Handicap International

Victim Assistance Policy Planning: Decentralization as a Key?

While victim assistance is becoming an increasingly familiar topic for signatories of the Mine Ban Treaty, the problem remains of how best to implement such programs. The author suggests that it is time for a switch from "top down" to "bottom up" implementation.

A Southeast Asia Regional Initiative

In mid-2001, Handicap International (HI) began an initiative to strengthen the capacity to develop policy planning and effective implementation of projects in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam by identifying, supporting and linking actors at national and regional levels.

From July to October 2001, national workshops on victim assistance have brought together governments, ministries, provincial actors, non-governmental organizations and international organizations (IHO) representatives, and associations of disabled persons. These national workshops prepared a regional conference held in November 2001 in Bangkok, Thailand.

The regional conference concluded with agreement on the necessity of the following:

* Establishing a living regional network highlighting "best practices," maintaining contacts, collecting information, and producing and updating a directory of service providers from governments, NGOs and IOs.

* Helping national actors work in a collaborative manner and developing a prioritized portfolio of programs for each country.

* Presenting the results of this ongoing process to intergovernmental meetings in order to enlist further technical and financial support for victim assistance in the region.

In Cambodia, such a coordination mechanism among all actors in victim assistance already exists through the Disability Action Council (DAC) and will soon be reinforced. In Laos, the National Council for Disabled Persons (CNDP) is instrumental in bringing all national actors together regularly. In Vietnam, the process is currently underway through the Ministry of Health and concerned NGOs and IOs.

It is worth noting that representatives from Laos and Vietnam, two non-signatory states, participated in the latest intersessional meetings in Geneva.

On the eve of the Fourth Meeting of States Parties, one can assess positive results from the international process as it has enabled the international community to develop a shared common understanding of the framework of victim assistance strategies. As far as implementation is concerned, however, the driving force no longer lies in Geneva or New York, but rather in Phnom Penh, Vientiane, Hanoi or Bangkok.

Donor countries are not the ones to best determine national policies. Appropriation of national priorities and projects by a wide range of national actors remains the key for effective implementation and sustainability.

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Reinforcement of National Coordination