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PeaceTrees' EOD Program in Vietnam

PeaceTrees Vietnam has explosive ordnance disposal programs in Dakrong and Huong Hoa, the two westernmost districts of Quang Tri province bordering Laos. Huong Hoa was the scene of the Battle of Khe Sanh in 1968. These mountainous districts lack sufficient infrastructure and are afflicted by extreme poverty. The districts include a large number of ethnic minorities who have no written language, do not speak Vietnamese and suffer injuries from unexploded ordnance at a higher rate than the ethnic Vietnamese in the region. The war severely impacted the two districts, and about 80 percent of the territory is considered contaminated.

by Claire Yunker [PeaceTrees Vietnam]

PeaceTrees demining teams perform a mixture of explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) and area clearance. During the fiscal year, which ended September 2014, the teams received calls for 990 EOD tasks and received 2,718 reports of unexploded ordnance (UXO) from locals. Demining teams cleared 105,298 sq m (26 ac), of which 58,446 sq m (14 ac) were area-clearance projects.

In 2014, 29 PeaceTrees demining team members found and destroyed 6,834 items of UXO (329 cluster-bomb submunitions, 1,176 grenades, and 4,076 mortar shells and other projectile weapons). In addition, 15 large aircraft bombs were located and destroyed. Although the majority of these weapons were destroyed at a local site near Khe Sanh in Huong Hoa, the 15 bombs were too large for local destruction and were taken to coastal dunes for disposal.

Rough terrain and unforgiving weather complicates the work of PeaceTrees' EOD teams. For example, 500-pound bombs have to be carried by hand out to roads over a brutal, often steep landscape. Several team members put long trusses underneath the bomb, attach it to sticks and work together to carry it up to a waiting truck. UXO are often found in such large quantities that they cannot all be destroyed on a weekly basis out of concern for environmental damage. Area clearance for economic development purposes is often delayed because of the large volume of EOD calls PeaceTrees receives. In the past, teams also faced difficulty in communicating with local ethnic minorities because of cultural and language barriers. Over the years, experience in the districts helped PeaceTrees' teams learn better ways to work with and



Deminer handles mortar rounds.
All photos courtesy of PeaceTrees.



Clearance team members work together to carry a bomb.

employ the local citizens into the demining teams, which now include some minority representation.

The Ba Long Village Project

Natural disasters (most recently Typhoon Ketsana in September 2009) have recurrently devastated the Commune of Ba Long in Dakrong, Quang Tri. Overall, 495 houses in 10 villages flooded—including homes along the river—and 1,200 farm animals were killed or swept away.

In 2013, thanks to an innovative funding plan based on a US\$75,000 grant from the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) and matched by private donations, PeaceTrees Vietnam began work on a fixed clearance project to clear a safer new village site and nearby farmland in Dakrong.

The goal was to provide Ba Long residents with housing and agricultural land in a new village uphill from the flooded area. Residents could keep their old land, and were promised a new house and garden site. None of the villagers were required to move. Villagers who wished to relocate put their names on a list, and in fact the project was oversubscribed. A lottery chose the first 50 housing sites. The Ba Long Commune managed the entire process, while PeaceTrees ensured the families were not compelled to move and did so voluntarily. The new village is about one kilometer from the old site. The clearance project itself only took eight months and was completed in July 2014. During this fixed-site clearance project, 621 pieces of mixed Soviet-, Chinese- and U.S.-manufactured UXO were discovered and 90 ha (222 ac) of land were cleared.

A U.S. veteran of the war raised the majority of funds required to build a

community center in the new village, while the local government contributed the remaining funds. The community center was completed in early October 2014 on newly cleared land. On 30 October, 50 households drew lots for garden and home sites in the new village. The local government is providing partial funding for the new houses, and homeowners already began construction. This project represents a joint effort from the U.S. Department of State, many private donors, and the People's Committees of Dakrong District and Ba Long Communes. The Department of Foreign Affairs of Quang Tri and its Vice Chairman Nguyen Duc Quang facilitated the project.

Challenges and the Future

Quang Tri is a difficult place to work. Weather alternates between torrential rains and extreme heat. Typhoons, flooding, landslides, road construction, extreme terrain and diverse populations complicate the effort. However, much has been accomplished. The local governments are committed and innovative in their efforts to create a safe place for people to live and work. In cooperation with PM/WRA and Quang Tri province, Norwegian People's Aid recently developed a sophisticated data and mapping project that will prioritize clearance to the most dangerous areas and munitions. The project's objective is to allow the Quang Tri Provincial Authorities to maintain knowledge of contaminated and released areas, allowing for successful planning of socioeconomic development and making effective use of limited resources available to neutralize the war's legacy in the province. PeaceTrees Vietnam employs a data analyst who provides current and historical data to the Information Management System for Mine Action. ©



Clearance at Ba Yong.



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