

Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation

Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF) expanded its scope by developing a national system to coordinate mine-action activities in Vietnam. VVAF's previous collaboration with organizations served as a fundamental step toward establishing an effective national program.

by Ha Nguyen [Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation]



A BOMICEN deminer works in the field.
All photos courtesy of The International Center and VVAF.

Vietnam is believed to be one of the most explosive remnants of war (ERW)-contaminated countries in the world.¹ In 2000, the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense (MND) estimated that ERW contaminated 20 percent of Vietnam's territory (equal to 66,000 sq km), encompassing 63 provinces and cities. Although mines contaminated the border areas, the major problem was ERW. However, for much of the international community, the nature and scope of ERW contamination in Vietnam is unknown, and no precise figure exists for the extent of remaining contamination.²

Founded in 1980, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF) was one of the founding members of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. In 2009, VVAF's active projects were transferred to The International Center (IC), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization founded in 1977 to focus on issues in the developing world. VVAF has an

extensive history of providing support for the removal of ERW and programs for persons with disabilities as well as those affected by dioxin and Agent Orange. However, VVAF currently focuses on providing project support to various Vietnamese government agencies working in mine action.

VVAF has worked with the Vietnam Engineering Command's Technology Center for Bomb and Mine Disposal (BOMICEN) since 2001. This work includes designing and implementing the Vietnam Unexploded Ordnance/Landmine Impact Assessment and Rapid Technical Response project in six central Vietnamese provinces. The project's goal was to document the nature and scope of ERW and landmine contamination, as well as the social and economic consequences of contamination in six heavily-affected central provinces: Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue and Quang Ngai.

This partnership between MND and IC-VVAF was the first collaboration between MND and a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in the field of mine action. From inception, the project took almost two years to be implemented. Relevant parties from Vietnam and the United States made tremendous efforts during the two-year negotiation process to implement the concept of the Landmine Impact Survey (LIS), an initiative of the Survey Action Center and an internationally adopted methodology.

Three years after the study's implementation, the project cleared 1,357 ha (3,353 ac) of land, disposed of 24,018 ERW items and mapped 4,296 ERW-affected areas. Provincial stakeholders and government agencies now use data from the impacted areas in prioritizing clearance as well as planning socioeconomic development in the six provinces. In recognition of the project's success, the government of Vietnam expanded the survey to the 57 remaining provinces, using lessons learned. BOMICEN conducted the national survey, completing it at the end of 2013. By the time of this article's publication, the data entry will be complete and ready for analysis, which will improve the ability of Vietnamese officials to determine contaminated areas and prioritize demining activities.

Following completion of the LIS project, IC-VVAF continued supporting BOMICEN to implement small clearance projects for priority needs in contaminated communities in Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Quang Tri provinces.

Since 2010, in partnership with the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), IC-VVAF has provided technical assistance to Vietnam's national mine-action authorities, focusing on capacity development. VVAF and GICHD signed a tripartite memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Vietnam National Mine Action Standing Board of the National Mine Action Program (Program 504) to combine support in Vietnam. In its role as the chair of the Landmine Working Group (LWG), VVAF has the opportunity to discuss group members' concerns with the Vietnamese government, seeking more effective cooperation and a better working environment.

Prior to receiving international support, the Vietnam People's Army conducted the majority of demining work in Vietnam after the war ended in 1975. In the late 1990s, international support was channeled through approximately 10 NGOs to Vietnamese mine action.³ NGO activities focused on the highly contaminated areas with priority needs such as clearance, mine-risk education (MRE), victim assistance and community development. Research conducted by GICHD in 2011 shows that, through 2009, the Vietnam government



A bomb remnant used as a school-break alarm.

spent about US\$100 million on ERW clearance.⁴ The *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor* reported in 2013 that total international financial support for mine action in Vietnam from 2008 to 2012 was approximately \$36 million.⁵

According to Vietnamese regulations (reflected most recently through Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's Decision in 2006), the MND is responsible for implementing nationwide ERW and landmine clearance.⁶ However, incorporating other aspects of mine action—such as MRE, victim assistance and community development—requires participation from other ministries. Thus, an interministerial body focusing on mine action is needed to set up a national system to coordinate mine-action activities nationwide. This system should be able to verify the extent of contamination, plan for mine-action programs, quantify finished work and estimate the work that remains.

To this end, under the MoU with Program 504, VVAF and GICHD supported Vietnam's authorities in the development of the National Strategic Plan on Mine Action in 2010, the establishment of the National Mine Action Steering Committee (Committee 504) in 2011, development of National Mine Action Standards in 2013 and the Vietnam Mine Action Center in March 2014.⁶



Land-release pilot project in Thanh Hoa province, 12 April 2014.

To run such a large mine action program, the Vietnamese government needs to enhance its management capacity to ensure mine-action funding is used effectively. In 2014, IC-VVAF worked with GICHD and an International Standards Organization consultancy firm to support BOMICEN/MND in developing and implementing a pilot quality-management (QM) model for demining projects in Ha Tinh province. BOMICEN is applying the QM tools developed for this project in a pilot land-release project in the same province, with its technical method adapted from the Cluster Munition Remnants Survey applied by Norwegian People's Aid in Southeast Asia.⁷ IC-VVAF also supports GICHD in implementing the center's Management of Residual ERW (MORE) Program in Vietnam.⁸

Like other international organizations, VVAF experiences challenges during its programs: slowness of multi-layered administrative procedures, foreign military-relations pro-

cedures, differences in approaches to problems, and lack of full-time, international, ERW technical assistance. To overcome these challenges, VVAF maintains frequent communication with all related stakeholders; expands its access to pools of experts; continuously builds capacity for its staff; and develops flexibility in its strategic planning to adapt to the working context in Vietnam. ©

See endnotes page 65

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