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Faces of Mine Action: Tran Hong Chi Addressing the Legacy of UXO in Vietnam

Tran Hong Chi grew up amid Vietnam's unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination. Now as an adult, Chi works as a program coordinator for Clear Path International, which provides medical and rehabilitative assistance to survivors of UXO incidents.

The year 2013 marks the 40th anniversary of the U.S. withdrawal of troops from Vietnam in 1973, though the fighting between North and South Vietnam would not end for another two years. Even today, the war continues to affect people. The long-forgotten bombs that drove entire villages underground still injure and kill men, women and children. No one could have imagined that bombs dropped in the 1960s and 1970s would continue to exact such a toll well into the 21st century.

Bombs have always been a part of my life. Having grown up in central Vietnam, I led tours as a young man for war tourists, showing them places like Khe Sanh and Hamburger Hill, which are well known to returning U.S. soldiers and the general population from movies. I would take tourists 20 m (22 yd) underground, where my countrymen dug long, intricate tunnel systems, which entire villages used to escape the barrage of bombs that rained down on central Vietnam for nearly a decade during the Vietnam War.¹ Often, I paused far below the surface and tried to imagine the fear of hearing the bombs overhead, the dirt that fell with each tremor and the hope that the tunnel would hold after each blast.

When I was a young boy, my friends and I would play with the ordnance we found around my childhood home. Our parents and grandparents told us unexploded ordnance (UXO) were dangerous, which only increased our temptation to play with the bombs, bullets, rockets and other pieces we found. Our families could not afford toys, so we made our own. We would often take the munitions apart and sell the metal, collecting enough to sell for candy without having to ask our mothers. I was lucky that I was never hurt or killed.

Recent Casualties

Many are not as fortunate. In 2012, 73 mine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) casualties (18 killed/53 injured/2 unknown) were documented. A total of 104,973 (38,940 killed/66,033 injured) mine/ERW casualties have been recorded as of the end of 2012.² In my job as Vietnam program coordinator for Clear Path International (CPI), a U.S.-based, nongovernmental organization that has worked in Vietnam since September 2000, I see the impact of UXO on the Vietnamese people every day.

On 14 June 2013, Ho Van Thoa, a 9-year-old boy from Quang Tri province, attempted to dismantle an item of UXO to sell and buy sweets for himself and his friends. The ordnance he tampered with exploded, and the chemical white phosphorous burned him from head to toe. The blast broke his arm as well. While Thoa will recover, his face was badly burned. He will live with the limp caused by the damage to his ankle and the scarring for the rest of his life.

On 1 May 2012, in the mountainous village of Xuân Lạc, seven children between the ages of 12 and 15 were injured

when a cluster munition exploded. Sonur Thien, a 15-year-old boy, found the cluster munition while playing with friends. The device detonated in his hands, injuring all seven children. Thien took the brunt of the blast; he lost both of his hands and was blinded in both eyes.

In December 2012 two particularly tragic incidents killed five children under 16 years of age within days of each other in the provinces of Vinh Long and Nghe An. Sadly, explosive ordnance incidents often injure multiple children at once. Child fatalities tend to occur simultaneously since playful curiosity and sociability tend to draw children together to the bombs.

Help for Survivors

CPI supports landmine and UXO survivors and their families in many ways. Recent survivors receive financial assistance for medical expenses and rehabilitation costs. CPI often assists survivors with prosthetics and helps families pay for modifications to make their homes more accessible. In addition to initial care, CPI provides long-term aid such as follow-up medical treatments, replacement prosthetics and other services necessary to support survivors.³ CPI also awards scholarships to children of UXO survivors. In Vietnam, often all family members must work to support the family. When UXO disables one member (most often with the loss of a limb), the entire family suffers. Schooling becomes an unaffordable luxury. CPI helps keep survivors' children in school by providing financial support to cover books, supplies, uniforms and tuition.

Progress Through Partnership

The Freeman Foundation (based in Stowe, VT, U.S.), the Dorothea Haus Ross Foundation, Adopt-A-Minefield, the McKnight Foundation and Episcopal Relief & Development originally funded CPI. It also received funding from individual donors, such as Dr. Joan Widdifield.³ Now the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) primarily funds our work. This survivor assistance funding comes from the American people and is a special source of pride for me. Such efforts show how the relationship between our two countries has grown, as Vietnamese and Americans work together to help survivors.


In the future, I hope that Clear Path Vietnam will continue reaching



At the age of 19, Hong Tran was working as a scrap-metal collector in Quang Tri province. While working, he accidentally uncovered and detonated an unknown munition. He lost his right hand and both legs due to the explosion. Photo courtesy of Ryder Hathaway.

Nearly 11 years ago, CPI held an open clinic at the Vietnam-Cuba Dong Hoi Friendship Hospital in Quang Binh province for those with lingering UXO injuries. We solicited UXO survivors by distributing pamphlets in the provinces of Quang Tri and Quang Binh, stating that we offered medical attention from U.S. volunteer doctors. The doctors evaluated the extent of the largely untreated injuries and determined if CPI could assist in surgery, prosthetics or rehabilitation. After survivors were diagnosed at the clinic, they were referred to other hospitals for treatment.

Living along the border in Quang Binh, a woman named Ho Thi Ha heard of our open clinic and made her way to the office. The journey was not easy for her. She came from a very poor family and had no vehicle with which to make the long trip. Moreover, Ha's injuries were severe. White-phosphorous burns had long ago fused her legs together, forcing her to

further into the largely underserved, rural countryside where many incidents still go unreported and where survivors remain unaware of the help available to them. I am proud to work alongside my CPI colleagues and partner with the American people through PM/WRA as we seek ways to improve survivors' lives. 

walk on her knees. She hitchhiked, at times on her knees, through the jungle to the office to ask for help. This journey took six-and-a-half hours.

Ha arrived just as we were closing the clinic. Bringing her inside, we offered her lunch. After her parents' premature death, Ha began raising her three younger siblings on her own and asked if she could take half of her lunch home to them. Having just traveled for hours on her knees, Ha's first thought was for her siblings at home. She won our hearts, and we vowed to do all we could to help her.

CPI sponsored 11 surgeries for Ha that eventually removed enough scar tissue to allow her to walk on her own after many grueling physical therapy sessions. The joy of seeing Ha walk again after suffering for so many years was truly inspiring.

Four years after arriving at the clinic, Ha gave birth to her first child, something she thought would never be possible. Our first visit to Ha with her baby was emotional for all of us.

Contact Information



Tran Hong Chi
Vietnam Program
Coordinator
Clear Path
International
Khe May Lake
Guesthouse
Ward 3, Dong Ha, Quang Tri / Vietnam

Mobile: +84 905 311 666

Tel: +84 533 857 718

Email: chi@cpi.org

Website: <http://cpi.org>

Endnotes

1. In Vietnam, this war is known as the American War.
2. "Vietnam." *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor 2013*. http://www.the-monitor.org/custom/index.php/region_profiles/print_profile/816. Accessed 24 September 2013.
3. Email correspondence with James Hathaway and Tran Hong Chi. 24 September 2013.

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