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Prioritization and Partnership in Lao PDR

Explosive remnants of war continue to be a problem in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, affecting children and schools in many communities. With funding provided by the Humpty Dumpty Institute, Mines Advisory Group and International Relief and Development have collaborated to combat the problem of unexploded ordnance and improve affected communities. This article focuses on UXO clearance and its impact in Khammouane province.

by Sean Sutton [MAG]



One of nine large bombs villagers showed the MAG team when they first came to help Phanop village in Khammouane province. This bomb is one of the biggest—2,000 pounds (0.9 metric ton).

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

In a narrow valley surrounded by high mountains in Khammouane province, children laugh as they play football (soccer) at Phon Toun School. Until recently, the school playground was contaminated with deadly cluster bombs.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic suffered from prolonged civil conflict between communist Pathet Lao and Royalist forces during the 1950s. In the mid-1960s, as neighboring Vietnam was engaged in conflict with the

United States, North Vietnamese troops began channeling supplies through Lao PDR to South Vietnam along what was to become known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In an effort to interdict these supply lines and target North Vietnamese enclaves, Lao PDR was subjected to intensive aerial bombardment by the United States from 1965 until 1974. Nearly two million tons (approximately 1.8 million metric tons) of bombs were dropped, including 250 million cluster bomb submunitions.



Children wash and refresh themselves in the school playground. HDI and its two implementing partners, MAG and IRD, have cleared and developed 115 schools in Khamouane province and fed over 12,000 children daily over the last two years.

The unexploded remnants still cause scores of accidents annually and deny people the chance to develop land and prosper.

MAG in Lao PDR

MAG has been working in Lao PDR since 1994, enabling communities to live safer lives by developing an effective local capacity to clear unexploded ordnance. From October 2008 until September 2009, MAG teams cleared 7,349,733 square meters (1,816 acres) of land and destroyed 24,216 items of UXO, assisting 206 villages and benefiting 54,859 people. A key element to MAG's success is prioritizing areas where its clearance work can have the most impact.

Partnership work, such as the projects outlined on the following pages, is vital to this success. MAG has also focused on improving the capacity of the country's national clearance agency, UXO Lao, through technical support, and MAG handed over large parts of the program to UXO Lao in 1999 and 2001.

Phon Toum School. Khounsay Doungmamyvong is a teacher at Phon Toum School, which has more than 200 pupils, aged 5 to 13. "Back in 1995, we decided we

had to build a new school, as the one we had was far too small," she says. "We cleared the vegetation from the new site and found a lot of unexploded bombs. We moved the ones we found and put them in a pile on one side," she recalls. By sheer luck, none of the bombs detonated during the process. "[Moving the bombs] was a big problem. The bombs were very dangerous and the children were at risk. When MAG came here, we asked for their help to [remove] the bombs we had found and to check the area," says Doungmamyvong.

Under a US\$12 million, three-year grant that The Humpty Dumpty Institute secured from the United States Department of Agriculture, MAG worked as an implementing partner and cleared more than 5,000 square meters (about 1.2 acre) around Phon Toum School. Altogether, however, over 2.6 million square meters (6,400 acres) have been cleared under this program by MAG in Lao PDR.

The MAG team found 10 BLU-26 bomblets in the Phon Toum School's playground, each capable of causing injury or death. HDI's other implementing partner, International Relief and Development, undertook post-clearance activities that improved health and increased

access to Phon Toum School, along with hospitals, schools and markets elsewhere in the province.¹

UXO is not the only obstacle facing education in Khammouane. The province has some of the worst school enrollment and retention rates in the country, a problem that HDI and its two implementing partners, IRD and MAG, are working to improve. Under the recipient agreement between HDI and MAG, launched in 2006, MAG cleared UXO from school areas in 115 villages. Once the school grounds were cleared, IRD rehabilitated school buildings, constructed wells and toilets, and involved the community in maintenance and school support.

In addition, the project provides schoolchildren with highly nutritious mid-morning snacks distributed by IRD. These snacks, as well as take-home rations, provide a strong incentive to parents to allow their children to attend school, instead of helping farm the land or collect scrap metal. In addition to the food provided by USDA, HDI established a series of gardens at over 100 schools to provide students with supplemental vegetables. MAG cleared these as well. So far, 115 schools have received assistance since the project began, and enrollment in these schools has increased by 23 percent.

“I am very happy and very proud,” said Doungmamyvong. “MAG and IRD have done amazing things here: The children are safe, [whereas] it was very dangerous before. Education is very important—our future depends on it.”

Naweang farm. The majority of people in Lao PDR are subsistence farmers and the impact of millions of unexploded cluster bombs has

been catastrophic. On a farm in Naweang village in Khammouane province, in central Lao PDR, Air and his wife Mai have just started harvesting their rice crop. Like much of the province, this area was heavily bombed during the American-Vietnam War.

“Every year when I tried to plow the land I would find bombies,” recalls Air. “I would collect them in

my T-shirt and put them at the edge of the field. It was dangerous and I was scared—but it was safer than hitting them—with my trowel. The biggest issue for me was the children. I was worried that they would play with the bombies.”²

In 2008, MAG cleared the land and found an additional 300 bombies. Following this work, MAG’s partner Triangle, a nongovernmental



Thong weeds his vegetables growing in part of a cluster bomb unit while holding his son, Nek. Unexploded bomblets dropped in containers like this are a deadly legacy of the war.



A grieving couple close to an unexploded cluster munition. Their son and a friend were playing with two cluster munitions a few days earlier. One of them went off and they were both killed.

agency focused on rural development, was able to build an irrigation channel and a pumping system to bring water from a nearby river. This equipment enables families in the area to grow two rice crops per year instead of one. Previously, there was insufficient water to grow rice during the dry season.

“This paddy field supports nine people including our two children, two orphans we look after and our parents,” says Air. “The land is safe to farm now, it is safe for my children and we get two rice crops a

year. This means we get more rice and it is fresher, so it tastes [delicious]. We are in a much better situation and we are very grateful.”

Conclusion

This impact-driven focus to MAG’s clearance activities and the proactive engagement with other development agencies working in the heavily contaminated areas of Lao PDR ensure that MAG is able to benefit dozens of communities who have been living under the threat of UXO for more than three

decades. Impact assessment surveys show the success of this approach: Of the households in areas where MAG has worked, 86 percent have shown an increase in income since the completion of MAG’s clearance activities. ↴

See Endnotes, Page 80

MAG’s work in Lao PDR is made possible by its donors including AusAID, the European Commission, The Humpty Dumpty Institute, Jersey Overseas Aid Commission, MAG America, the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), U.K. AID from the U.K. Department of International Development; and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The author’s book of photographs, titled *Laos: Legacy of a Secret*, will be published in November with funding from Irish Aid, MAG America, Nam Theun 2 Project, Novotel Hotel, Vientiane and PM/WRA.



Sean Sutton is an award-winning photojournalist, whose pictures showing the impact of landmines and ERW on communities are well-known and have been published and exhibited all over the world. His book documenting how UXO affects people in Lao PDR was runner-up for the Leica European Publisher’s Award. Sean is MAG’s Photographer and Audio Visual Coordinator and has worked for the charity since 1997.

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