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## Lao PDR

by Natalie Wall [ [Mine Action Information Center](#) ]



The Lao People's Democratic Republic is the world's most heavily unexploded ordnance-contaminated nation, deeply affecting the country's people.<sup>1</sup> During the Second Indochina War (also known as the Vietnam-American War), the United States carried out more than half a million bombing missions over Lao PDR, during which over two million tons (1.8 million metric tonnes) of ordnance were dropped.<sup>2</sup> Up to 30 percent of this ordnance failed to explode,<sup>2</sup> leaving behind a serious UXO contamination that still kills and maims innocent men, women and children in one of the poorest

nations in the world.

### Thirty-Five Years Later

Although no one knows the exact number of UXO-related casualties in Lao PDR, estimates indicate that since 1973 as many as 12,000 civilians have been killed or injured by cluster munitions.<sup>3</sup> Thirty-five years later, 25 percent of villages in Lao PDR are still affected.<sup>4</sup> While UXO is the biggest source of the contamination in the country, landmines laid during the war are also a threat. In 2006, there were 59 new mine/UXO casualties recorded in Lao PDR; 16 people were killed, 33 were injured, and the fate of the other 10 was unknown. Within the first six months of 2007 there were already more casualties recorded than in all of 2006.<sup>5</sup> The Lao UXO National Regulatory Authority (NRA) is currently undertaking a survey of all UXO casualties and accidents in the country in order to rectify the position of incomplete and misleading data availability. Until now, the two main sources of information on victims and accidents have been a survey undertaken by Handicap International in 1995–96, and UXO Laos' records of accidents and victims reported to it from 1999 to 2007. The NRA's survey, about two-thirds completed at the time of writing, has identified about 30,000 casualties from some 6,000 villages in the country. There are 10,000 villages overall so that it is expected that the final figure will be around 50,000 dead and injured in the

period since 1964; inevitably, this will include some numbers of war-dead. To date, information available in the Lao PDR has suggested that there has been an ongoing casualty rate of about 100 *per annum*. Preliminary analysis of limited data available from the new survey suggests that this could represent only one-third of the true numbers.<sup>6</sup>

## UXO Action

In 1996, the government of Lao PDR established the Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao) with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme, UNICEF and other stakeholders. UXO Lao was primarily responsible for all UXO action in Lao PDR until 2006, when the National Regulatory Authority, created by government decree, became operational.<sup>5</sup>

## Data Collection (or Lack Thereof)

Historically, without a systematic data-collection system, casualty data has been found to be too inaccurate and incomplete to give a precise picture of the situation in Lao PDR, thus hindering the ability to prioritize clearance and mine-risk education missions.<sup>5</sup> Although UXO Lao has maintained a database of UXO casualties since 1996, the information from this database is not comprehensive. Only records after 1999 contain usable information and UXO Lao only records accidents from their field operations, which are only active in nine of 17 provinces, and only in the most severely affected districts within those nine provinces. Casualties are also reported by all mine-action operators in Lao PDR, the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise and the Lao Disabled People's Association in Lao PDR, but casualties still go unreported at a high rate because they often happen in poor or remote areas or in areas where UXO Laos has no presence. Activities at the time of the accident have often not been systematically recorded, making it difficult to determine which behaviors are contributing to UXO accidents.<sup>5</sup>

The NRA has recognized the ineffectiveness of the current UXO data collection system and set forth plans in 2007 to develop a national comprehensive data collection and management system, already underway. In mid-July of 2007, the NRA determined to deploy the Information Management System for Mine Action database as the national database system.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this advancement, the latest version (v5) is still a work in progress, and the IMSMA database is not yet fully functional in Lao PDR.<sup>6</sup>

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The NRA's UXO Casualty/Accident Survey was devised by its victim-assistance unit in 2006–07 and began implementation at the end of 2007.<sup>7</sup> The survey is broken into two phases:

- **Phase One:** District enumerators visit every villager to collect historical casualty/accident data, from their earliest memories to the present.
- **Phase Two:** Collection of data occurs on ongoing and current casualties/accidents. The district enumerators give every village chief instructions on how to contact the NRA provincial staff who will visit the scene of the accident and gather full information as soon as the alert is received.<sup>9</sup>

The results of this survey will be used to define danger areas for clearance and risk education as well as to improve the conditions of UXO survivors in Lao PDR; nevertheless, there are ongoing complications with data collection that the NRA must work around. Some complications include the education levels and understanding among the selected district enumerators; the large number of ethnic languages and lack of understanding of the Lao language in many villages; the unfortunate overlap of data collection with the

advent of the rainy season since May, making parts of the countryside inaccessible; and unreliable coding of villages and geographical coordinates, due in part to the frequent relocation and renaming of villages in Lao PDR.<sup>9</sup>

## **Mine-risk Education**

The lack of accurate casualty data has been a major obstacle in the provision of MRE in Lao PDR. Without accurate data, it is relatively difficult to distinguish which areas are high-risk and need the most MRE to prevent future casualties.<sup>5</sup> Inadequate systematic activity-logging at the time of the incident (to determine what activity occurred before the incident) makes specific MRE targeting very difficult.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to developing a comprehensive nationwide data-collection system, the NRA is also in the process of identifying high-risk areas and groups in Lao PDR. During a UXO-risk education needs assessment in 2006, four at-risk groups were identified: scrap-metal collectors, scrap-metal dealers, children who play with or collect scrap metal and farmers. High-risk areas are still being identified, but first the location of where most accidents occur and where the scrap-metal trade is takes place must be specified.<sup>9</sup>

In 2006, a total of 273,569 people obtained some type of MRE in Lao PDR compared to 241,618 people in 2005.<sup>5</sup> UXO Lao and World Education/Consortium, an American nongovernmental organization, were the main organizations conducting UXO/mine-risk education in 2006, with UXO Lao reaching more than 150,000 people and WEC reaching some 120,000 students.<sup>5</sup>

The World Education/Consortium worked with the Ministry of Education on an in-school program in 2006, enabling 120,000 students and 3,800 teachers from 1,300 schools to participate in the program.<sup>5</sup> Both WEC and the NRA have stated that refocusing on high-risk areas with an in-school program was impractical because it is too difficult to target high-risk areas without an accurate data-collection system. WEC has thus focused its efforts on capacity development, training 30 teachers in each district every year. Although schools may not be located in high-risk areas, they may have some students from high-risk areas in attendance.<sup>5</sup>

The NRA hopes to drastically reduce the number of UXO victims through targeted risk reduction.<sup>10</sup> “The Strategic Plan for Mine Risk Education in Lao PDR,” designed to fulfill this objective, has four goals:

1. A targeted UXO-risk-reduction strategy focusing on high-risk areas and high-risk groups<sup>11</sup>
2. A sustainable risk-education program
3. Effective coordination and management of the risk-education program
4. Effective monitoring of the risks-education program<sup>12</sup>

By focusing on MRE and educating the people of Lao PDR, NRA hopes to make more people able to foresee impending danger involving UXO and learn how to prevent future accidents.

## **“COPE”ing with Rehabilitation**

Established in 1997 by POWER International, the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) is the sole provider of prosthetic and orthotic services in Lao PDR,<sup>12</sup> with about 40 percent of its patients being UXO victims.<sup>13</sup> COPE is only able to treat patients who travel to one of the five designated centers in Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khuang, Savannakhet and Pakse. The remoteness of some rural villages in Lao PDR prevents many victims from gaining access to any of these five centers.<sup>9</sup> Currently, however, COPE has combined efforts with CARE to develop a project designed to answer this age-old problem by

instituting a pilot outreach program in Sekong to ensure that survivors receive the <sup>9</sup>

To help UXO-affected victims, COPE reimburses all travel and accommodation expenses. It also provides all devices free of charge.<sup>14</sup> COPE distributes leaflets to all villages in the country describing the services available and how they can be accessed.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

More than 30 years after the Vietnam-American War, Lao PDR is still in need of critical victim assistance. Lao PDR must focus on data collection before any vast improvements in victim assistance and MRE can be achieved. With the advent of a reliable system, Lao PDR can now begin to target high-risk groups and areas. As the NRA implements and realizes its plans to fix this pervasive problem, the Lao PDR may be one step closer to some solutions to its long-running UXO problems. ↕

## Biography



**Natalie Wall** joined the *Journal of Mine Action* as an Editorial Assistant in November 2007. She is currently a junior at James Madison University, where she is studying media arts and design. She is also a photographer for the *Bluestone*, JMU's yearbook.

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