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Lao PDR

by Kateland Shane [Mine Action Information Center]



Graphic courtesy of MAIC

From 1964 to 1973, the Lao People's Democratic Republic became involved in the Second Indochina War (known as the Vietnam War in the West) between the United States and North Vietnam. For those nine years, Lao PDR was subjected to the heaviest bombing in world history.¹ U.S. bombing records indicate that there were over 580,000 bombing missions carried out and over two million metric tons (2.2 million U.S. tons) of ordnance dropped on Lao PDR during the conflict.²

Extent of the Contamination

Up to 30 percent of bombs dropped on Lao PDR failed to explode, leaving behind an unexploded ordnance problem that affects almost every part of the country, including schools, hospitals and homes.³ In 1997, an Impact Survey was completed in Lao PDR and concluded that 87,213 square kilometers (33,673 square miles) of land were affected by UXO.⁴ The majority of this UXO contamination was caused by cluster bombs releasing submunitions, known in Lao PDR as "bombies." Millions of these bombies were dropped over Lao PDR during the conflict. The UXO Trust Fund and the Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Program's latest study of the bombing data finds that the number of bombies dropped was 288,485,886, with an estimated 12 to 30-percent failure rate. More than 109 million pieces of debris are still potentially left to clear.⁵

Other types of UXO found in Lao PDR include heavy bombs,⁶ rockets, grenades, artillery munitions, mortars, and landmines.² Lao PDR is affected by landmines as well; however, while there may be up to 1,000 minefields, these are mostly located in remote areas and the threat of UXO is significantly greater to the population.⁷ Although Lao PDR has not yet become a signatory of the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention,⁸ the Laotian government announced in 2005 its plans to accede to the Convention in the future.⁷

The UXO Threat

The scrap-metal trade is a dangerous practice contributing to the UXO casualty problem in Lao PDR. Scrap-metal dealers will pay up to 2000 kip per kilogram (about US\$0.09 per pound) of old ordnance. Since the average income in Lao PDR is less than \$2 per day, the extra money that scrap-metal collection

brings can be very tempting.⁹ In 2004 and 2005, the unauthorized and unregulated ordnance collection for scrap metal was said to be increasing, a trend that continued in 2006.⁷ John Dingley of the United Nations Development Programme says it is difficult to confirm if the scrap-metal trade is contributing to a significant amount of casualties because "there is evidence that this is the case, but as the activity described in the accident report¹⁰ is sometimes 'playing' or 'tampering' rather than straight-up scrap collecting it is hard to definitively say it is or is not."¹¹

Although the exact number of UXO casualties is unknown, reports indicate there have been about 13,000 UXO victims since 1975.⁴ In 2006, 40 casualties were recorded from January through July.¹² UXO accidents have slowed development in Lao PDR for many reasons. They often claim people in their prime—the average age of a UXO victim in Lao PDR is 26.¹³ Treating a victim is also expensive and can consume up to half of a working family's annual income. Furthermore, children involved in UXO accidents are often denied access to valuable education, trapping many in a cycle of poverty.⁴ UXO accidents have also taken a toll on the national health system in Lao PDR, with UXO victims consuming already limited medical resources.¹³

UXO LAO

In 1995, the Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Program (UXO LAO) was created with the assistance of the UNDP.¹ UXO LAO covers almost every aspect of humanitarian UXO action by conducting services in such areas as clearance and community awareness. UXO LAO began operation in the province of Xieng Khouang in 1997 with the aid of Mines Advisory Group in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and now works in the nine most heavily impacted provinces.⁵

Clearance Efforts

Organizations involved in humanitarian clearance in Lao PDR include UXO LAO, MAG UK, Handicap International–Belgium, *Foundation Suisse de Deminage* and Norwegian People's Aid. From 1996 to December 2005, UXO LAO clearance operations in Lao PDR rendered 7,221 hectares (28 square miles) of land cleared of UXO.³ From January through July 2006, UXO LAO cleared about 1,502 hectares (six square miles).¹¹ Although UXO LAO had not finalized its work plan for 2007 at the time of writing, the projected amount of land to be cleared in 2007, according to the National Strategic Plan,¹⁴ is 2,000 hectares (eight square miles); however, due to improved productivity through new equipment and systems, UXO LAO intends to clear 2,300 hectares (nine square miles) in 2007.¹⁵ The government of Lao PDR estimates it will take no less than 10 years to clear or mark all highly impacted land of UXO.²

Community Awareness

Together with its implementing partner, UNICEF, UXO LAO works to bring UXO awareness to over 700 villages each year. In 2005, community-awareness teams briefed over 170,000 people.¹³ Community awareness activities at the village level include playing games in the classroom, distributing educational materials, holding group discussions with adults, and putting on plays and puppet shows in the evening. An integrated UXO curriculum allows teachers and students to learn about the risks through such activities as creative arts and puppetry.¹³ Other organizations involved in community awareness activities include Handicap International–Belgium, Consortium Laos (World Education, Inc./World Learning), the Lao Youth Union and the Lao Women's Union.²

In the Future

Due to the extent and nature of Lao PDR's UXO contamination, the problem is not going away any time soon, but steps are being taken to help improve the situation for the future. In 2003, the government of Lao PDR finalized the 2003–2013 Lao National Strategic Plan, "The Safe Path Forward," for the Lao UXO program. According to the Plan, UXO LAO will increase its productivity and complete the clearance or

marking of all high-priority areas by 2013.⁷

Biography



Kateland Shane has worked as an Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Mine Action* since May 2006. She is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in technical communication at James Madison University. After graduating in 2007, she plans to return to JMU for graduate school.

Endnotes

1. UNDP Lao. <http://www.undplao.org/whatwedo/crisisprev.php>. Updated December 2006. Accessed December 4, 2006.
2. E-mail correspondence with Joseph Wenkoff, UNDP. August 16, 2006.
3. Bounpheng Sisawath and Edwin Faigmane. "UXO Lao Work Plan 2006." Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme, Vientiane.
4. Sisawath, Bounpheng. "UXO Lao's Fight against Unexploded Ordnance." *Journal of Mine Action*. Issue 9.2. February 2006. pp. 28–29. <http://maic.jmu.edu/JOURNAL/9.2/focus/sisavath/sisavath.htm>. Accessed November 30, 2006.
5. E-mail correspondence with John Dingley, UNDP. November 9, 2006.
6. Heavy bombs include 250-lb, 500-lb, 750-lb, 1,000-lb, 2,000-lb, and 3,000-lb iron bombs.
7. "Lao People's Democratic Republic." *Landmine Monitor Report 2006*. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2006/laos.html>. Accessed November 30, 2006.
8. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*, Oslo, Norway. September 18, 1997. http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban_trty.htm. Accessed November 30, 2006. The document was opened for signature in Ottawa, Canada, December 3, 1997, and thus is commonly known as the Ottawa Convention.
9. Wiseman, Paul. "30-year-old Bombs Still Very Deadly in Laos." *USA Today Online*. November 11, 2003. http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2003-12-11-laos-bombs_x.htm. Accessed November 30, 2006.
10. The accident report referenced here is a form distributed in Laotian villages by UXO LAO community awareness teams. Village Leaders are asked to fill out this form in its entirety when a UXO accident occurs in their village. The report includes information about the location of the accident, the details of the injury and the activities of the victim at the time of accident. Completed forms are then returned to UXO LAO at the end of each month.
11. E-mail interview with John Dingley, UNDP. August 17, 2006.
12. E-mail interview with Bounpheng Sisawath, UXO LAO. August 18, 2006.
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14. *Resolutions of the Lao PDR Government on National Strategic Plan for the UXO Programme in the Lao People's Democratic Republic 2003-2013: "The Safe Path Forward."* April 29, 2004. <http://www.undplao.org/whatwedo/bgresource/uxo/Stratplan%20Res%20EngFINAL.pdf>. Accessed November 30, 2006.
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