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Vietnam

by Katie FitzGerald [Mine Action Information Center]



Graphic courtesy of MAIC

Long after the Vietnam War's end,¹ remnants of the conflict remain in playgrounds, schools, farms and roads. Over 30 years have passed, but abandoned ammunition and unexploded ordnance—known as explosive remnants of war²—have taken the lives of thousands of civilians. Once a week, a person in central Vietnam is killed or injured by an encounter with UXO.³ Vietnam is one of the most ERW-contaminated countries in the world, with abandoned explosives such as old bombs, artillery shells, grenades and other munitions left over from past wars. The country has an estimated 350,000 to 800,000 tons (317,515 to 725,748 metric tons) of UXO that affect the population's daily life.⁴

Progress has been made, though. The Vietnamese government ratified Protocol V to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons⁵ on November 28, 2003, which is "the first multilateral treaty of international humanitarian law requiring parties to an armed conflict to clear all unexploded and abandoned ordnance that threatens civilians, peacekeepers and aid workers after the fighting is over."⁶ Protocol V entered into force November 12, 2006. Organizations such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund's Project RENEW and Veterans for America (formerly the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation) are working hard in Vietnam for ERW clearance, yet much more work has to be done in order to free the country from this deadly legacy.

The Threat of ERW

"Right now, the biggest ERW problem in Vietnam is unexploded ordnance left over from the last 50 years of conflict,"⁷ says Allan R. Vosburgh, a Vietnam veteran and former Assistant for Explosive Ordnance Disposal, Humanitarian Demining Technology and Munitions for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-intensity Conflict at the U.S. Department of Defense. "There are landmines, but the vast majority of casualties result from human interaction with UXO."⁷

In many ways, ERW such as UXO and abandoned explosive ordnance can cause more problems than landmines. Because these kinds of ERW are often found on the surface and are much more visible, the people have a higher degree of interaction with UXO and AXO than with landmines, and since no one knows how or when ERW could detonate, it often causes many casualties. Due to the random distribution and visibility of abandoned explosive ordnance,⁸ male adults and especially children, because of their curiosity, are those most at risk.⁹

According to Vosburgh, the Vietnamese have done a great job in approaching the challenge, but their resources are limited. No one agency or organization can attempt to do all the work, but many international nongovernmental organizations are each doing their best to help.⁷

NGOs Involved in Mine Action in Vietnam

Many organizations such as Clear Path International, Mines Advisory Group, Peace Trees Vietnam, Veterans for America and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund have worked hard to clear ERW in Vietnam. Following are two examples of what is being done.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. VVMF arrived in Quang Tri province in 2000 and initiated Project RENEW with the Provincial People's Committee. Project RENEW, "Restoring the Environment and Neutralizing the Effects of War," is "a model for a comprehensive and integrated management approach to deal with the problem of postwar landmines and UXO."¹⁰ Project RENEW focuses on raising people's awareness of the danger of landmines/UXO, providing assistance to victims, removing visible landmines/UXO reported by the community and coordinating mine-action programs.

Thanks to VVMF's collaboration with Peace Trees Vietnam (another NGO working in Vietnam), Project RENEW's EOD Response Team of Quang Tri Province has taken steps to clear Vietnam of ERW. In one instance on April 27, 2005, the EOD team disposed of 539 bomblets (BLU-26¹¹) found in a rice field in Vinh Linh district, approximately 300 square meters (359 square yards) from someone's home, the largest concentration of bomblets ever found in one place in Quang Tri province. Afterwards, the villagers showed the EOD team other contaminated sites with UXO visible on the ground.¹² The Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs granted US\$150,000 to Project RENEW for a mine-risk education program in Quang Tri.⁴

Veterans for America. VFA, working with Vietnam's Technology Center for Bomb and Mine Disposal, conducted the first phase of a Landmine Impact Survey covering Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Ha Tinh provinces in 2004. The LIS will help to identify and plan work in the areas that have been most affected by ERW.⁴ VFA continues to conduct ERW awareness programs and operate rehabilitation clinics and has provided assistance to approximately 20,000 victims.

Conclusion

In addition to the organizations listed above, the U.S. government funded Phase I of an Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Landmine Impact Survey, which was completed in 2005. This survey interviewed over 5,000 participants in 344 communes in Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Ha Tinh provinces and led directly to the clearance of more than 6,200 pieces of ERW. Phase II is planned to begin this year and will expand to other provinces.¹³ According to a publication by the U.S. Department of State, "with continued effort by all parties, it may be possible for Vietnam to become free from the humanitarian impact of landmines and UXO by 2014 or soon thereafter."⁴

Biography

Katie FitzGerald works as an Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Mine Action* and is in her last year at James Madison University where she is pursuing her Bachelor of Arts in print journalism.



Endnotes

1. The Vietnamese refer to this as the American War.
2. **Editor's Note:** Some organizations consider mines and ERW to be two separate entities, since they are regulated by different legal documents (the former by the Ottawa Convention and Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the latter by CCW Protocol V). However, since mines are explosive devices that have similar effects to other ERW and it is often impossible to separate the two during clearance operations, some in the community have adopted a "working definition" (as opposed to a legal one) of ERW in which it is a blanket term that includes mines, UXO, abandoned explosive ordnance and other explosive devices.
3. "Contending With Explosive Remnants of War" Arms Control Association.
http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004_09/Sanders.asp?print. Accessed August 10, 2006.
4. "Vietnam." *To Walk the Earth in Safety*. U.S. Department of State, Office of Weapons Removal & Abatement, June 2006. <http://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rpt/walkearth/2006/>. Accessed August 28, 2006.
5. *Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects*, Geneva, Switzerland, October 10, 1980. <http://www.ccw-treaty.com/KeyDocs/ccw-treatytext.htm>. Accessed September 7, 2006.
6. "Treaty on Explosive Remnants of War to Enter into Force." International Committee of the Red Cross. May 16, 2006. <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/treaty-weapons-news-160506?opendocument>. Accessed August 9, 2006.
7. E-mail correspondence from Allan R. Vosburgh. Director of Explosive Safety, Golden West Humanitarian Foundation. August 8, 2006.
8. Abandoned explosive ordnance is a kind of ERW that has been left behind or dumped by a party during an armed conflict, which may or may not have been primed, fused, armed or otherwise prepared for use. "Defending Human Rights Worldwide Glossary." Human Rights Watch.
<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/usa1203/2.htm>. Accessed August 28, 2006.
9. *Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) Warnings and Risk Education*, Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. May 2003. http://www.gichd.ch/fileadmin/pdf/publications/ERW_Warnings.pdf. Accessed August 9, 2006.
10. *Landmines/UXO Quang Tri-Vietnam*. Project RENEW. <http://www.landmines.org.vn/home/static.php?iSta=13>. Accessed August 10, 2006.
11. For more information on each of these munitions, see the Mine Action Information Center's "Munitions Reference." Available at http://www.jmu.edu/cisr/_pages/research/munitions.shtm. Accessed January 11, 2007.
12. "Project Outcomes" *Project RENEW. Landmines/UXO Quang Tri-Vietnam*.
<http://www.landmines.org.vn/home/static.php?iSta=16>. Accessed August 10, 2006.
13. "US Helps Clear Unexploded Ordnance." Department of Science and Technology Dong Nai. <http://www.dost-dongnai.gov.vn/e9ttchitiet.asp?idd=5784>. Accessed August 10, 2006.

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