

# A Regional Approach

## MINE AND UXO RISK REDUCTION IN VIETNAM, LAOS AND CAMBODIA

Since Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have similar mine and unexploded ordnance risk problems, a regional approach may contribute to finding solutions for these three.

Understanding common features and challenges is a first step toward reducing the number of casualties in the region.

by Andrew Wells-Dang

**2005** marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the conflict variously called, depending on the speaker's perspective, the "Vietnam War," "American War" or "Second Indochina War," encompassing Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. All sides and observers agree the conflict was one of the most costly in world history in terms of loss of human life and use of military ordnance, including bombs and mines of all kinds. Thirty years later, while significant cleanup of this ordnance has taken place—first by regional governments, then through international non-governmental organizations, corporations and bilateral donors—landmines and unexploded ordnance still kill or maim over 1,000 people each year in the three Indochina countries. Why does this still occur? What can be done to educate people about the risk from mines and UXO, or reduce it by other means, so that no more new casualties take place?

These were among the questions posed at a regional workshop on landmine and UXO risk education in the Mekong subregion, held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, in November 2004. This workshop, cosponsored by the Fund for Reconciliation and Development (a U.S.-based NGO) and the Cambodian Red Cross, brought together 75 practitioners and program managers from the three Indochina countries, as well as Afghanistan, Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand. UNICEF-Vietnam, Catholic Relief Services and Consortium—Laos provided additional funding support. Through presentations, small group discussions and a collective writing exercise, participants identified best practices, lessons learned and recommendations for mine and UXO risk education across national boundaries.

It goes without saying that each country in the region is different economically, politically and geographically. However, UXO and mine contamination in the three countries share common features due to their specific historical experiences in the 1960s and 1970s and subsequent development.



Yei marcher: A laywoman marches during Mine Awareness Day in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

### UXO Versus AP Mine Contamination

The primacy of UXO contamination over that of anti-personnel mines is overwhelmingly prevalent in Laos and Vietnam, where national and local surveys have found that over 90 percent—and up to as high as 97 percent—of remaining ordnance in the ground consists of cluster bombs, grenades, aircraft bombs, shells, rockets and other UXO, not landmines. Less commonly known is the fact that this is also true in most of Cambodia, where UXO casualties now exceed AP mine casualties by a factor of 2- or 3-to-1. With the exception of the K5 mine belt along Cambodia's border with Thailand, the remainder of the country shows patterns of contamination quite similar to those in Laos and Vietnam.

In contrast to AP mines, which are "always on" and are designed to explode at the slightest touch, many pieces of UXO appear inactive and may remain so until repeatedly struck or tampered with. Others are highly unstable and could respond differently to stimuli depending on the time and environment. Many pieces of ordnance can be handled repeatedly without exploding, but this offers no guarantee for the next person who encounters them. Cluster bomblets—the ubiquitous BLU 26/36 "bombies" dropped in immense quantities up and down the former Ho Chi Minh Trail and on other aerial bombing targets—are particularly sensitive to handling due to their fuse mechanisms.

Incidents involving UXO frequently claim multiple victims, as shrapnel may be scattered over a wide area, and cause upper-body injuries, burns, and/or blindness to survivors—a profile divergent from the single-victim, lower-limb amputation consequences of many AP mine explosions. Furthermore, the pieces of UXO themselves are not laid in minefields but can be found randomly. Facing no alternative, people continue to plant in UXO-contaminated fields, hunt and gather in contaminated forests and live in contaminated villages. When encountering UXO, they walk around, use local marking methods or move UXO to a more out-of-the-way location.

Thus, traditional AP mine risk education messages such as "don't touch," "don't move," "report to the authorities" are neither appropriate nor effective in areas with mainly UXO contamination. Local people have been touching and moving UXO for decades, and many feel (rightly or wrongly) they know how to do so safely. Moreover, there may not be authorities to report to or, if there are, they will not respond without payment and/or a long wait.

As a consequence, several international mine action organizations in Cambodia and Laos are experimenting with programs to involve villagers in clearance activities and in developing new MRE messages. "Village demining" or "villager-assisted clearance" remains controversial in the mine action community owing to safety (and liability) concerns. Community-based education, by contrast, is widely accepted and formed a key part of discussions in the November 2004 regional workshop.

### Tampering—The Main Cause of UXO Casualties

"Tampering" means deliberate handling of ordnance with the goal of extracting metal and/or explosives. This is often referred to as, or lumped together with, scrap

metal collecting. With no other employment options, adult males living in contaminated areas search for UXO, remove it from the ground and sell it to local dealers, who then remove the valuable metal and explosives for resale and sometimes export. In some cases, children are also involved, either as passive observers or active participants. International organizations working in Savannakhet province, Laos, have documented recruitment of children to search for and remove scrap metal. Adults and children carrying cheap metal detectors are a common sight along the Lao-Vietnam border and in other contaminated areas.

Reports from all three countries indicate that anywhere from 30 to 80 percent of UXO casualties result from tampering. The actual numbers may be even higher, as many survey respondents provide unlikely answers, such as "nothing happened—it just exploded," that could be cover stories for tampering. Scrap-metal collecting is not illegal in itself, but handling of explosives is, and survivors may fear that they will not receive assistance if they admit to handling live ordnance. In any case, observers attribute the roughly 50-percent increase in casualties noted in 2004 entirely to increased tampering. The report from Phase I of the Vietnam national impact survey, being carried out by the Ministry of Defense Engineering Command and the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, is expected to confirm these findings.

Given that tampering is an economic activity, why is it increasing at a time when economic development is occurring in the countries of Indochina as never before? The simplest answer is that scrap and explosives collectors are not benefiting equally from economic growth. Meanwhile, increased demand for metal and explosives in the construction, mining and timber industries, among others, has raised the sale price of these items to new highs. New roads are providing easy access to heavily contaminated areas that have not been populated or exploited since the war. Additionally, metal detectors have become cheaper and more easily available.

The tampering crisis is difficult to resolve using traditional mine risk education messages. Most people, or at least most adults, involved in the scrap trade are fully aware of the risks they are taking but proceed regardless. Solutions must include economic and livelihood components as well as UXO-specific ones. Among the suggestions raised in the 2004 regional workshop were the following:

- Expand common development strategies to other organizations working in the same areas; integrate MRE with economic development activities.
- Share experiences and lessons learned by communities affected by UXO with others, for instance survivors visiting the homes of scrap dealers.
- Involve scrap collectors in village MRE and mine action activities.
- Provide alternative vocational training and job placement services.

### Need for Data-gathering and Assistance to New Survivors

From a public health and injury prevention perspective, current casualty risks in all three countries are relatively low in comparison to other injuries, especially road



A Cambodian woman and her child walk past a mine field to collect water in Kompong Speu, southern Cambodia, April 1, 2000. Mines stifle economic activity in Cambodian villages and endanger lives.



accidents (which claimed the lives of 6,000 Vietnamese in the first half of 2005 alone). Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam do have among the highest numbers of mine and UXO survivors in the world, but most of these were injured during or immediately after conflicts that have now been over for decades. In Vietnam especially, the population of mine/UXO survivors is aging, posing a new set of health challenges for government agencies and non-governmental organizations involved in their care.

Nevertheless, there is a compelling case for continuing to collect information and provide assistance to **new** victims as well. First, there are still significant numbers of new deaths and injuries each year; since 2000, these have averaged approximately 800 per year in Cambodia (with full reporting), 200 in Vietnam and 100 in Laos (with incomplete reporting). Cambodia ranks no. 3 or no. 4 worldwide in reported casualties, Vietnam around no. 10 and Laos between no. 15 and 20, depending on the year. Each casualty affects not only the individuals involved, but also their families and communities, frequently with devastating effects on family finances through medical bills, transportation costs and lost income. Thus, while longer-term survivors may have adapted to their injuries, new survivors and their families, as well as the families of those killed by mines and UXO, face immediate costs and challenges.

Second, the historical circumstances of the Indochinese conflict offer clear moral reasons for increased assistance. The U.S. government and NGOs as representatives of the American people have a particular responsibility, given that the vast majority of remaining lethal ordnance is of U.S. origin, certainly in Laos and Vietnam, and also in eastern and central Cambodia. Among the populations most at risk are the poorest, ethnic minority groups and those living in remote areas—which are often overlapping categories. Indeed, mines and UXO form one of the obstacles these groups face toward equitable, sustainable development together with national majorities.

What does this analysis suggest for mine action programs and the international donor community? First, reduction of risk—not area cleared or numbers of ordnance—should become the primary objective of all mine/UXO action activities. In most situations, given limited resources, this means foregoing expensive site-clearance operations in favor of mobile explosive ordnance removal and small-scale, community-level clearance. Many international agencies are already taking steps in this direction. A subsequent step, again being pioneered by several existing operators, is the formation of UXO-specific operating procedures, rather than simply applying anti-personnel mine terminology and techniques to what is in most places a distinctly different problem. This applies as strongly to mine risk education programs.

The regional workshop in Siem Reap also recommended closer cooperation in MRE and mine clearance among the Mekong subregion and neighboring countries, with specific emphasis on accurate data on mine/UXO contamination and casualties. Where information is lacking or inadequate, additional field surveys and mine marking should be conducted to better target MRE interventions.

The Cambodia Mine/UXO Victim Information System (CMVIS) has proven to be an effective tool in monitoring casualties and ensuring full reporting nationwide. Laos, which also has a national program with significant international assistance, will implement a similar system, tentatively titled LUMVIS, in late 2005 or early 2006.

Surprisingly, given its size and level of development, Vietnam remains the most difficult of the three countries in which to gather and share information. The challenge in Vietnam is how to expand successful models of cooperation in several central provinces to other parts of the country that are also heavily affected by UXO and landmines, particularly along the south-central coast and in the central highlands. A successful, proactive casualty information system need not be top-heavy or bureaucratic, but does require central-level support, assured funding, and integration with existing health and disability data sources. If these objectives can be achieved in Cambodia and Laos, they are certainly within Vietnam's capacity as well.

To date, international donor funding for mine action and victim assistance has been spread quite unevenly among the three countries. Cambodia has received an average of \$20 million (U.S.) per year over the last five years, or roughly \$2 per capita. Laos has received \$5 million annually, around \$1 per capita. Vietnam has averaged \$5–10 million, or about \$0.10 per capita. This discrepancy appears likely to continue. For instance, Australia announced in July 2005 that it will provide \$57 million for mine clearance and vic-

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tim assistance in the southeast Asia region over the next five years. Reports indicate the majority of this funding will be sent to Cambodia and Laos, though Vietnam will also be considered. There are doubtless political as well as operational reasons for donors' funding decisions, but given the similarities in UXO contamination, tampering and scrap metal activities and risk profiles, a more regionally balanced approach would seem warranted.

The regional workshop on mine/UXO risk education described above offers one model of increased cooperation across national boundaries without high levels of bureaucracy or organizing costs. Other activities currently being implemented include multi-country research projects, site visits from one country to another, exchange of experiences within international organizations working in more than one country in the region and formation of informal partnerships among national NGOs, who may in some cases receive funds from the same external donor(s). Of course, intergovernmental cooperation remains necessary and beneficial as well. The more information publicly shared and the more stakeholders from various sectors participate fully in creative problem solving, the more quickly Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam will move toward becoming a mine- and UXO-risk-free region in the future. ♦

See "References and Endnotes," page 104.



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