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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 30th 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 this is one of the most costly in world history in terms of loss of human life and use of military ordinance, including bombs and mines of all kinds. Thirty years later, while significant progress in this domain 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.

UXO Versus AP Mine Contamination

The primary UXO contamination of over that of anti- personnel mines is overwhelmingly prevalent in Laos and Vietnam, where natural and local surveys have found that over 90 percent—and up to as high as 97 percent—of remaining ordinance 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 2.3 or 3.1. 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 “bom- bies” 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—steps divergent from the single-victim, lower-limit amputation consequences of many AP mine explosions. Furthermore, the pieces of UXO themselves are not left in metal detectors 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.

UXO risk educator messages such as “don’t touch,” “move,” “report to the authorities” are neither appropriate nor effective in areas where UXO are found, as many UXO were rendered harmless by the Ministry of Defense Engineering Command and on other aerial bombing targets. UXO versus AP mine contamination: 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?

UXO—Mine Awareness Days

Mine Awareness Days (MADs) are an example of traditional mine risk education messages. Most people, or at least most adults, involved in the scrap trade are fully aware of the risks they take 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 and mine contamination 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

UXO 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 take 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:

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Tampering—The Main Cause of UXO Casualties

 uxo is a complex problem. At the root of it is the 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, adults and children are risking their lives to make a living. In many cases, employment options are few and sometimes export. In some cases, children are also involved, either as passive observers or active participants. International organizations working in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have documented recruitment of children to work in scrap metal collection and to clear UXO. 

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Although the much-publicized weapons of mass destruction have not been found in Iraq, less has been said about what munitions were found there, the hazards they present, or the efforts of Coalition Forces to remove the stockpiles. This article gives a first-hand view of the peril in Iraq.

Assessing and Managing the Problem

The discovery of these “ammo dumps” was not unexpected. Preparations to deal with captured enemy ammunition were part of the initial campaign planning for Operations Iraqi Freedom that started in October 2002. What was not anticipated until much later in 2003 was the scope of the problem. Ground commanders quickly put together plans and manpower in an attempt to secure or destroy the enormous caches of ammunition that were manufacturing. These well-intentioned efforts would eventually produce mixed results and, in some instances, amplify the problem.

Increased awareness but uncertainty of the magnitude of the captured enemy ammunition (CEA) problem resulted in the United States Army Corps of Engineers requesting to conduct an assessment in June/July 2003 to determine if their existing munitions re-mediation programs could bring aid. Specifically, Combined Joint Task Force 7 (CJTF-7) sought assistance in the munitions collection process, the transportation of the ordnance to disposal areas and the operation of the demolition sites themselves.

Due to the perceived urgency of the situation, CJTF-7 wanted capability in place within 30 days of the assessment to begin reducing or replacing military personnel and equipment engaged in the CEA mission (now renamed the Coalition Munitions Clearance program). Combined Joint Task Force 7—the “customers”—wanted the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and its contractors to provide a “cradle-to-grave” service that could eventually be transferred over to Iraqi authorities. Funding was provided to the Corps of Engineers on 28 July 2003 to commence CEA operations. USACE awarded several contracts on 8 Aug, 2003—one to the Parsons Corporation (Pasadena, Calif.) for $80 million (U.S.) to provide the logistical support for the overall effort, and three contracts worth $67 million each to the following unexploded ordnance contractors: Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technologies (Knoxville, Tenn.), Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Management Solutions (CEA) problem resulted in the United States Army Corps of Engineers requesting the operation of the demolition sites themselves.

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Endnotes and References

Mine Free: Not Anytime Soon, Kidd [from page 4]

Endnotes


An Operator’s Perspective on Ottawa’s Article 5, Nergaard [from page 35] Endnotes


3. ISO 9000 is a set of standards for quality management systems that is accepted around the world. For more information about the various quality certifications, visit International Organization for Standardization at http://www.iso.org/ or Simply Quality’s Frequently Asked Questions about ISO 9000 at http://www.iso-web.org/iso.htm.

Demining in Iraq, Banks [from page 8]

Endnotes

1. World Vision is the service arm of EKI International. MAI is the EKI mine action company presently operating with several other EKI companies in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2. More work in Iraq is for a national disarm. International donors demand DME standards and international quality assurance/quality control systems to impact work.


4. Embarkments are to contain flood water. Bunds are generally used to describe defensive positions, banks of earth and embankments.

5. Banke-mandit can stand on the banks to watch for signs of hazardous material that may be dug up.

Assisting Landmine Accident Survivors in the Thai-Burma Border Region, Mathier [from page 11] Endnotes


2. While only governments can sign the convention, non-state actors can sign the Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action through an organization called General Call. General Call engages NGOs to respect and adhere to humanitarian norms, starting with the anti-personal mine ban.


3. Simple plump works use a plump line, which is a reference line guided by a string or cord weighted at the end with a large weight known as a plumb bob. It is used to create a reference line for creating vertical lines.


Hidden Killers in Afghanistan, Sharif [from page 20] Endnotes


2. One square kilometer is approximately 0.386 square mile.


Observations on Recent Changes in Northwest Cambodia’s Mine/UXO Situation, Simmonds, et al. [from page 24] Endnotes

1. LIS is an abbreviation for Landmine Impact Survey that is commonly used in Cambodia. This is not to be confused with LIS (Landmine Impact Survey), which is in common use in most other parts of the world.


The War Goes On, Yusubagh [from page 27] Endnotes

1. A United Nations’ mission is referred to as the Vietnam War.


Claiming the Future, Sivasith [from page 29] Endnotes


4. This square kilometer is equal to about 0.386 square mile.


6. A hectare equals approximately 2.4 acres.

Developing Alternatives: The Locality Demining Model in Cambodia, Leighton [from page 35] Endnotes

1. Richard Meyers in his report, Tempering: Deliberate Handling and Use of Live Ordnance in Cambodia (MAI, Handicap International-Belgium, Norwegian People’s Aid, 2004), recognition that deliberate handling occurs amongst the most vulnerable families with the least traditional economic opportunities such as generation of income through informal trade or labor ownership. For online text of this report see http://www.mai.org.uk/mica/tampering/Cambodia.pdf.

2. Review of the locality demining model was undertaken by Pia Willem for MAI.

3. As observed by MAI Cambodia’s technical operations manager, Gary Fenton.


Afghanistan LIS, Franch [from page 38] Endnotes

1. A Landmine Impact Survey, or LIS, is a community-based national survey that measures the extent of the impact of the landmine problem in a country, based on the number of mine victims, socio-economic blockages and type of mine.


5. Landmine Action and Development, Turco [from page 47]

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