

Claiming the Future

The Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao) has established a regional office and field offices in nine heavily impacted provinces in Laos. In 2003, the government announced a national strategic plan to deal with the UXO problem, introducing major reforms in the sector and defining clear objectives for clearance operations. UXO Lao productivity has greatly increased since then and is on track to more than double its annual output by the end of 2008.

by Bounpheng Sisavath [UXO Lao]

The Lao People's Democratic Republic has the distinction of being, per capita, the most heavily bombed nation in the world.¹ As a result of the broader conflict in Indochina during the 1960s and 1970s, Laos was the scene of extensive ground battles and intense aerial bombardment.

From 1964 until 1973, over half a million bombing missions were carried out over the country, and as a result, over two million tonnes (2.2 million tons) of bombs were dropped.¹ Based on its experience over the last ten years, UXO Lao estimates that up to 30 percent of all ordnance dropped failed to detonate on impact, leaving a lethal legacy that continues to kill, maim and impoverish over 30 years later. This explosive ordnance included vast quantities of cluster bombs which released sub-munitions, or bomblets (also referred to as "bombies" by the Laotian people). Such unexploded bomblets become, in effect, anti-personnel munitions. Bombing records provided by the U.S. government indicate that over 80 million of these bomblets were dropped all over the country.² In addition to those, there are also vast quantities of unexploded large bombs, rockets, grenades, artillery munitions, mortar shells, anti-personnel landmines and improvised explosive devices lying around.

Such large-scale contamination has resulted in over 13,000 casualties since 1975, and vast portions of agricultural land were rendered unusable. A countrywide survey conducted in 1996 on the socio-economic impacts of UXO in Laos found 25 percent of the total villages were affected. In rural communities, high levels of poverty—and risk—are clearly linked to high levels of UXO contamination. Villagers living in such impoverished conditions often find that they are confronted with "enforced risk-taking." They either continue to live in acute poverty, and in many cases chronic malnutrition, or risk injury and death by working UXO-contaminated land.

According to a 1997 Impact Survey,³ 87,213 square kilometres⁴ of land (out of a country-wide total of 236,800 square kilometres) are considered as being at risk from UXO contamination: 12,427 square kilometres at high risk and 74,786 square kilometres at moderate risk.

The Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao)

In 1995, the United Nations Development Programme, UNICEF and other stakeholders supported the Laotian government in establishing UXO Lao. At the same time, an international trust fund for humanitarian mine action was established under the auspices of UNDP Laos. UXO Lao initiated operations in the province of Xieng Khouang in 1997 with the support of the Mines Advisory Group (UK), and it now operates in nine of the most heavily impacted provinces in the country. In each of these provinces, UXO Lao established a provincial office and extensive field operations, and is assisted by a number of international implementing partners—currently, three: MAG UK, Norwegian People's Aid and Gerbera, which provide field-based technical advisors.

Provincial operations reflect the generic principles of humanitarian mine action. Clearance operations are split into two components: mobile "roving" teams that destroy ordnance lying on the surface and reported by villagers, and area clearance teams that detect and destroy buried items, which often inhibit developmental and infrastructure projects. Survey activities provide a crucial operational element through the provision of detailed maps that help to prioritise work and monitor provincial progress against the baseline 1997 Impact Survey. Training and capacity-building, both formal (at the National Training Centre) and on-the-job, are also an integral part of the programme, and Lao trainers and international technical advisors deliver them. UXO Lao also implements community awareness activities that seek to raise a new awareness among rural communities of the continued dangers of UXO and to educate villagers on ways to minimise the risks caused by UXO through behavioural change.

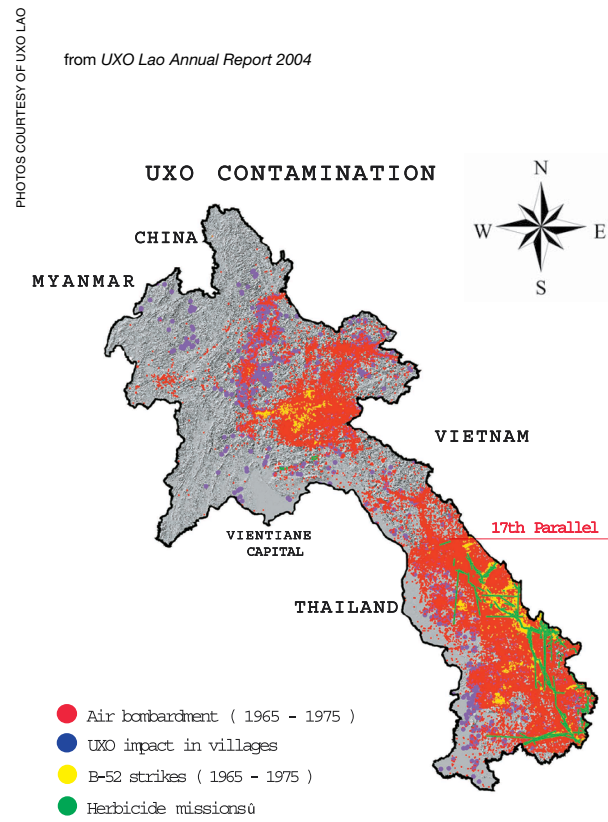
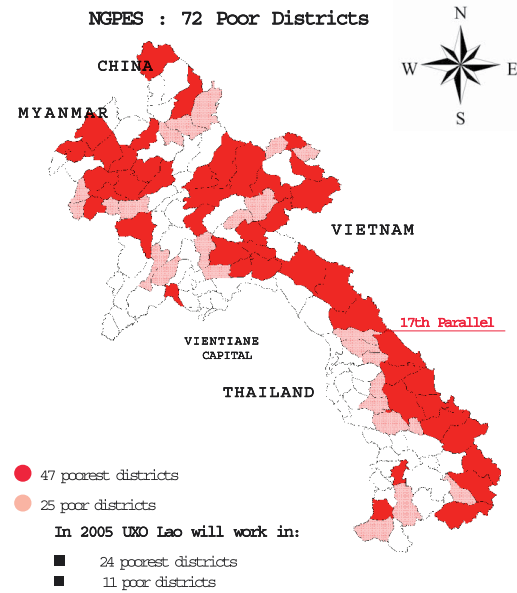
The Lao National Strategic Plan

In 2003, with the finalisation of the Lao National Strategic Plan for the UXO Programme,⁵ UXO Lao embarked on an ambitious programme of restructuring and reforms that would allow it to

1. More than double its yearly productivity (for example, from approx. 900 hectares⁶ of land cleared per year to 2000 hectares/year, within a five-year timeframe)
2. Introduce new UXO clearance techniques and methodologies
3. Speed up the "indigenisation" of the organisation, with progressively decreasing reliance on international advisers

The achievements have been impressive since the promulgation of the Strategic Plan. Through the streamlining of support functions (administration, logistics, procurement and finance), overall productivity of the area clearance capacity has increased from 886 hectares⁶ per year in 2002 to over 1,250 hectares per year in 2004—an increase of nearly 42 percent. Similar increases in productivity are noted in the number of bombs destroyed through roving teams and in community awareness activities.

The next three years will be crucial as UXO Lao embarks on a more in-depth review of its operational procedures, analysing and improving the way it actually clears and releases land and the way it deals with unexploded bombs. This review may recommend the introduction of new methodologies and new techniques/technologies best suited to the Lao context. The



findings could lead UXO Lao to completely modify its approach to its humanitarian mandate, to better meet the strategies and objectives of national and provincial authorities, and to better support the socio-economic development of the country.

As mentioned above, in 2003 UXO Lao launched a major initiative to strengthen its capacity in the key areas of support to operations, including human resources, administration, finance, logistics and procurement. Through a combination of specific activities aimed at both the development of sound and transparent procedures and the development of the capacities of personnel involved in these functions, it was originally estimated that UXO Lao's productivity could at least double within a two- to three-year timeframe. Experience of the last year confirms this assessment, and still greater improvements could be introduced by the end of 2006 when the quality management initiative is expected to be completed.

UXO Lao is also currently developing, with its implementing partners, key initiatives that will allow the development of new procedures and methodologies expected to yield considerable increases in productivity. These initiatives could eventually lead to a different approach to UXO clearance in Laos, one relying more on battle-area clearance techniques (as currently used in other UXO-contaminated theatres of operation) rather than on minefield clearance methodologies as are currently used. Pilots were launched in recent months and are expected to eventually continue implementation well into the years 2006 to 2008. Among others, these initiatives include the following:

1. A desk review of UXO Lao standard operating procedures, to ensure that optimal use of UXO Lao assets (human resources and equipment) is achieved.

2. A review of UXO Lao SOPs to determine where and how new equipment and technologies could be introduced in order to generate greater cost-efficiency in its operations. This review will involve considerable investment in staff development and trial data collection.
3. A systems review on work methodologies used by UXO Lao in explosive ordnance disposal work. This review would include a comparison with similar operations worldwide in order to determine the most efficient way to release land according to developmental priorities. The findings would necessarily have an impact on prioritisation and tasking and could eventually bring about the introduction of the key concepts of battle area clearance and risk assessment, management and reduction/mitigation.

UXO-related Accidents

Lao PDR continues to be plagued by an increasing number of UXO accidents. In the first six months of 2005, UXO Lao recorded 74 accidents involving 124 people. Of those 124 victims, 30 died of their wounds, and 74 were children. It is important to note here that those figures are partial and reflect only accidents that occurred in those districts where UXO Lao operates.

These figures show a marked increase in the total number of accidents and victims in Lao PDR in the last two years. In fact, for all of 2003, UXO Lao recorded a total of 60 accidents and 109 casualties. An upward trend initiated in 2004 (with a 77-percent increase over 2003 accident reports) appears to be getting even steeper. Without the benefits of extensive research and analysis of the root causes of these accidents, UXO Lao suspects this increase may in large part be due to the expanding trade in scrap metal, with a number of smelters opening around the country and large quantities of scrap metal being exported to neighbouring countries.

This latest development points to the urgency for UXO Lao to increase efficiency and overall productivity. It also calls for an in-depth review of current community-awareness activities, of the messages delivered to impacted communities, and of the socio-economic linkages established between public well-being and the vast quantities of scrap metal and explosives that represent an additional source of disposable income to cash-strapped rural populations. Providing new sources of revenue for affected populations through training and job creation is thus very important.

Operational Achievements

Between January 1996 and mid-2005, UXO Lao teams cleared a total area of 6,572 hectares⁶ of land: 5,180 hectares of prime agricultural land and 1,392 hectares for other infrastructure/development projects.⁵ A total of 141,238 items of UXO were destroyed by area clearance teams: 174 big bombs (> 100 lbs.), 60,953 bomblets, 2,911 anti-personnel landmines and 77,200 other pieces of UXO. Additionally, during this same period, roving teams destroyed 499,526 pieces of UXO in 2,546 villages, of which 3,05 were big bombs. Community awareness teams visited 5,252 villages reaching approximately 1.3 million people. ♦

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Endnotes

1. Mennonite Central Committee Web site, http://www.mcc.org/clusterbomb/report/laos_appendix.html. Accessed Nov. 15, 2005.
2. U.S. Bombing Records in Laos, 1964–1973. Congressional Record—Senate, May 14, 1975 (p. 14,266).
3. Handicap International Belgium. “Living with UXO—Final Report on the National Survey on the Socio-Economic Impact of UXO in Lao PDR.” 1997.
4. 1 square kilometre is equal to about 0.386 square mile.
5. *The Safe Path Forward 2003–2013*. April 2004. <http://www.undplao.org/UXO%20stuff/Stratplan%20Res%20EngFINAL.pdf>. Accessed Nov. 15, 2005.
6. 1 hectare equals approximately 2.5 acres.