

Laos

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By: Erin Herring, *Mine Action Information Center*

History of War

Laos has suffered from the impact of the most severe bombings in the world's history: those that occurred during the Second Indochina War between 1964 and 1973.¹ Ordnance indiscriminately plagued nearly everyone in Laos during these catastrophic years. Both aerial bombardment and ground battles affected people across the nation; consequently, the devastated Laotians still suffer from the effects of war 30 years after the Lao People's Revolutionary Party gained control of the government.²

As much as 30 percent of the two million tons of ordnance dropped on Laos did not explode, indicating that there is still a huge amount of unexploded ordnance contaminating most of the nation's territory.² Because of the nature of the warfare, UXO remains throughout rural farming and mountainous areas, as well as more densely populated towns and villages.

UXO poses a larger problem for the Laotian people than the presence of landmines. Landmines do exist on the periphery of Laos in unknown numbers that could exceed 1,000 minefields,³ but the landmine problem is not as urgent as the problem of UXO because the latter directly impacts more communities.

Laos has not yet signed the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention⁴ but is considering acceding in the future. The country's primary concern about signing is that "it would not be able to meet the [Convention's] deadline for destruction of mines in the ground."³ Also, the military hesitates to relinquish the right to use landmines as neither China nor Vietnam has yet signed the Convention. Still, there have been many recent efforts to raise awareness on this issue, and Laos has shown continuing support for the actions of the AP Mine Ban Convention.³

Impact of UXO

The overwhelming presence of UXO impacts every aspect of life for the Laotian people. It has halted agricultural development because effective irrigation systems require large amounts of clear land. Stunted agricultural development in turn leads to diminished economic development, perpetuating poverty and displacement of families. Many farmers face the choice of using potentially dangerous land to increase crop production or failing to provide enough food and money to support their families. In the most densely contaminated areas, taking such risks often results in injury or death of the family breadwinner.²

Injuries from accidents are common and devastating for families. Care for individuals is extremely taxing on health care, placing a potentially avoidable burden on the population's resources. Victims are often in the prime of their lives when injured, and families suffer from the loss of their main income sources.²

Unexploded Ordnance Clearance

UXO Lao, the Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme, was established to restore the amount of uncontaminated land available for farming and to "reduce the number of civilian casualties caused by unexploded ordnance."⁵ The difficulty with this endeavor is that the program lacks the resources to safely address problem



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areas, conduct surveys and remove UXO. Before UXO Lao was established in 1996, farmers, rather than military personnel, were the only nationals conducting clearance because no one was equipped to perform such a task. Since 2003, low-cost, low-technology metal detector use has actually increased the number of UXO casualties in some provinces.²

In order to clear land, roving teams first respond to reports from surveyors by clearing surface UXO on the ground to reduce initial risk. Area clearance teams must be summoned to clear sub-surface UXO. They use metal detectors to locate potentially dangerous entities; this task is a much slower and riskier process, so teams are trained carefully.²

Education

UXO Lao is raising awareness throughout the nation by educating children through school programs. Established in 1999, these mine risk education programs are being run in four of the nine affected provinces of Laos. Games, activities, drama, songs and puppetry are increasingly integrated into school curricula in areas where these programs have been introduced. The hope is to raise awareness of the dangers of UXO in rural communities and reduce the risk of UXO-related casualties.² UXO Lao also works with adults²; programs are geared to effectively reach as many people as possible in order to maximize the cooperation of individuals, communities and workers.

Conclusion

Laos faces challenges that simply do not exist in many other nations because of dense UXO contamination. The situation will continue to improve over time as the public becomes more aware of the hazards of UXO, and as demining continues.

Endnotes

1. Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao). *Annual Report 2004*.
2. *UXO Lao: Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme*. <http://www.uxolao.org/>. Accessed Oct. 25, 2005.
3. "Lao People's Democratic Republic." *Landmine Monitor Report*. International Campaign to Ban Landmines. 2004. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2004/lao>. Accessed Sept. 29, 2005.
4. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*. Ottawa, Canada. Sept. 18, 1997. http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban_trty.htm. Accessed Oct. 10, 2005.
5. *Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao)*. United Nations Development Programme. http://www.undplao.org/UNDP_in_Laos/UXO.pdf. Accessed Sept. 29, 2005.

Contact Information

Erin Herring
Mine Action Information Center
E-mail: maic@jmu.edu