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Munitions and Mines: Peace Education for Laos

By Titus Peachey, Mennonite Central Committee

It was 8:00 one morning in March of 1998, when Phou Vieng, a villager in the northern Lao province of Xieng Khouang, was preparing his work for the day. Having recently built a simple house for his family, his first task for the morning was to dig several shallow holes in the earthen floor to anchor his bed. After measuring and marking the places where his bedposts would lodge, he prepared his digging tool and squatted beside the first mark.

In one short stroke, his life was forever changed.

The bomblet in Phou Vieng’s house was dropped as part of a massive campaign over Laos between 1964 and 1973. In most cases, everything had been destroyed. They had to rebuild their homes, repair the paddy dikes in their rice fields, and open up the soil with shovels and hoes. They carried on this intensive work in the midst of a staggering array of still-lethal ordnance. People are injured or killed during their everyday activities such as collecting firewood, herding livestock, or hoeing in their fields and gardens. Because of their curious shapes and colors, and because many of them are found easily accessible on top of the soil, cluster munitions are almost irresistible to children. In fact, over 25 percent of UXO-related casualties happen as children, none of whom were born when the bombs fell. At Nov. 22, 1993, four Tu Ya Chao children were walking along a street on the edge of Phouxavanh, Xieng Khouang province’s capital. They were taking the water buffalo to pasture when Koo Ya, four, and Sia Ya, six, noticed a round object in the ditch. It looked like the ball boys and girls toss to each other during Hmong New Year festivities. It was actually a cluster bomb. Sia Ya threw it to her brother. He couldn’t catch it and it landed behind him, exploding and killing him instantly. Sia Ya died after two agonizing days and nights in the provincial hospital. The story of the Chao children illustrates yet another tragic aspect of cluster bomb explosions. Compared to landmines, cluster bombs have higher explosive power and deadly fragmentation effects. They are designed to kill. In Laos, 52 percent of all UXO accidents have resulted in death.

In the period immediately after the war, the Soviet Union assisted with the clearance of a large state farm in Xieng Khouang province. Aside from this effort, the only assistance came from two North American NGOs. The

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Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and the Lao government initiated a UXO clearance project. The project quickly drew the attention of U.N. agencies and other governments. As funding became available, the project grew. From 1996-1998, over 122,000 pieces of UXO were cleared; approximately 50-75 percent of UXO cleared were cluster bomblets. By the year 2000, eight international partners, in cooperation with the Lao government and local partners, were clearing UXO in nine of the country’s 18 provinces and educating local people to the dangers of UXO.

As MAG began working in Xiang Khouang province, Laos, the newly trained clearance teams encountered a curious problem. Each morning, when they arrived at the work site they discovered, resting on top of the soil, new cluster bomblets that had not been there the day before. The work site was a large open area that was the future site of a teacher’s training college. A conversation with the villagers across the road from the worksite cleared up the mystery. It seems the villagers, who were aware that cluster bomblets were being destroyed each day, decided to carry cluster bomblets from their village to the clearance site each evening. In this way, the bomblets from their village could be destroyed, even though their village had not been chosen for clearance. This action by the villagers, while extremely risky, also made a clear statement about the presence of UXO in the vast affected areas of Laos. UXO is everywhere, and clearance teams can only begin to create tiny islands of safety in a great sea of ordnance. MAG and its counterparts in the Lao government responded quickly to this action by the villagers. Rather than putting all their resources into the sub-surface clearance of a piece of land, which would take months to clear, they split the team in two. One team remained to clear the site of the future school, while the other team traveled from village to village to destroy bomblets on the surface posing an immediate threat to life and safety. Roving teams continue to destroy bomblets on the surface but do not make the ground safe for agricultural use. The benefit of a roving team is the immediate reduction in risk, especially to children who are often attracted to the toy-like appearance of bomblets. Over a period of time, however, the Lao roving teams discovered that they could be called back to the same area repeatedly. Bomblets that bury themselves on impact often work their way to the surface as time passes. Through the natural expansion and contraction of the bomblets, the surface will split, new bomblets appear where none could be seen before.

In May 2000, I accompanied a film crew to Laos to help produce a documentary that will be shown on public television. I watched as a bomb clearance team prepared to blow up nine bomblets that had been found on a hillside used for grazing cattle. As the team worked, my colleagues and I spotted four more bomblets on the hillside. The metal shells of the bomblets had just begun to appear above the soil. This area had been cleared before and will certainly have to be cleared again.

April 2001 will mark the seventh anniversary of the beginning of systematic UXO clearance in Laos. Tremendous progress has been made since the first team of 20 clearance specialists was trained in 1994. Hopefully, all the destroyed ordnance has resulted in some reduced risk and some tragedies have been avoided. It is gratifying to see these developments. Despite all this work, there has been little reduction in the rates of injury and death. Casualties still occur at the rate of about one accident every two days. As the Lao population grows and the pressure on the land increases, new areas will have to be opened up for agricultural production and settlement. Much of this land will present a serious UXO problem. Ordinance clearance work will have to continue in Laos for decades.

MCC’s 25 years of history in Laos and ongoing struggle with the problem of UXO has led it into the arena of advocacy. As a people of faith committed to peace and non-violence, we could not visit with families who had experienced painful losses from cluster munitions without asking the larger questions about why and how cluster munitions are used. As we researched the continued production and use of cluster munitions in numerous conflicts around the globe, we became convinced that serious problems exist related to targeting, the size of cluster bomb footprints and dumb rates.

Over the past 35 years, in places like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Sudan, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Kuwait, Kosovo, Chechnya, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Afghanistan, cluster munitions have had a persistent and tragic record of indiscriminate killing. During Operation Desert Storm, at least 25 U.S. military personnel were killed by U.S. submunitions, and other U.S. personnel were injured. Cluster munitions are an increasingly significant obstacle in various peacekeeping operations.

WHAT ARE CLUSTER MUNITIONS?

Cluster munitions are small bomblets or submunitions which are delivered to their targets in large containers or shells. The container opens in mid-air over the target area, often dispersing the bomblets over an area the size of several football fields. A drop of several canisters can easily create kill zones of a square kilometer or greater in size. The bomblets may be the size and shape of a lawn dart, or an elongated soda can, and are designed to explode on or shortly after impact. The AP bomblets have fragmentation features which can send hundreds of shards of steel at ballistic speeds over a wide area. Anti-armor bomblets have shaped charges which can penetrate heavy armor. The cluster munitions are delivered in a bomb by aircraft, or launched by rocket or artillery projectile.

WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A LANDMINE AND A CLUSTER MUNITION?

The primary difference between cluster munitions and landmines is in their design. Cluster munitions are designed to explode as a result of their impact, so their effect is felt within a short time of their delivery. Landmines are designed to explode as a result of contact with or proximity to a person. By design, their effects may be felt many months after their placement, depending on when a person initiates contact with the landmine.

Cluster munitions which fail to explode on impact, however, are very similar in effect to landmines. Since dumb rates for cluster munitions are often in the 10 percent-30 percent range, most cluster munition strikes create the actual effect of a mine field.

MCC has joined other agencies in issuing a Call for a Moratorium on the production and use of cluster munitions. As a result of our work in Laos and our exposure to the UXO problem on the civilian population in post-war Iraq and Kosovo, MCC believes it is time for the international community to ban these weapons.