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Field Notes

The UXO Sector in Laos

by Titus Peachey [Mennonite Central Committee]

Nearly fifty years after the nine-year Secret War (1964–1973), Laos is the scene of a US\$35–\$40 million annual enterprise, employing more than 3,000 workers who, with assistance from governments and non-governmental organizations (NGO) around the world, are engaged in unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance, victim assistance and mine risk education (MRE).¹ The 2.2 million tons of bombs included an estimated 270 million cluster munitions, many of which failed to detonate on impact and created a lethal landscape to which villagers returned after the war. The inevitable post-war casualties now number more than 20,000.² A high percentage of victims over the past several decades were not alive when the bombs fell.²

In light of these statistics, many have declared that the task of clearing ordnance in Laos will take a century or more. In the early 1980s, there were no surveys or clearance operations, only bombs and a steady stream of sad stories. Today, the debate has shifted to the state of progress and the eventual end game. What indicators should be used: the number of hectares cleared? The amount of ordnance destroyed? The number of casualties? Or should the focus be on the number of UXO incident survivors still needing rehabilitative care? What about the number of economic development and poverty reduction initiatives that can move forward? And finally, when can the task be declared complete?

Recent developments within the UXO sector offer some help in answering these questions. While no one believes that every last piece of UXO in Laos will be destroyed, there is a growing sense of optimism that the next 10–20 years of quality work will significantly improve the safety of Lao

villagers. Through coordinated planning, hard work and persistence, important pieces are finally falling into place.

Administration

The National Regulatory Authority (NRA), active since 2006, is responsible for the oversight of the UXO sector in Laos, including policy, coordination, standards and quality management. It is chaired by the deputy prime minister and includes representatives from 17 different government ministries, and the United Nations Development Program and U.S. State Department provide technical advisors.³ A UXO Sector Working Group chaired by the NRA meets regularly to review progress and establish annual goals. In 2010, UXO clearance was established as the ninth Millennium Development Goal. While not all of the plans on paper have been integrated into action on the ground, this coordination at the national level is having a positive effect overall.



A villager hoes her garden in Phonsavan, Laos, a dangerous activity in a land littered with unexploded ordnance (1984).

Photo courtesy of Mennonite Central Committee/Linda Gehman Peachey.

Year	Submunitions via Battle Area Clearance	Submunitions via Roving Team	Other UXO via Battle Area Clearance	Other UXO via Roving Team	Total
2014	27,048	31,450	17,699	16,743	92,940
2013	24,320	15,967	22,127	19,073	81,487
2012	29,662	14,164	22,978	13,162	79,966
2011	19,431	13,359	16,981	13,051	62,822
2010	21,031	14,417	15,772	18,376	69,596

Figure 1. Number of submunitions and other UXO destroyed in Laos, 2010-2014. Information sourced from the *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*, 2011-2015.

Figure courtesy of the author.

Clearance

UXO clearance in Laos is managed by UXO Lao, the national enterprise, along with international humanitarian clearance operators including APOPO, The HALO Trust, Handicap International (HI), MAG (Mines Advisory Group), Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) and numerous commercial operators. Clearance teams in Laos routinely destroy between 60,000 and 100,000 pieces of ordnance a year, with numbers rising in recent years.⁴

Over the past several years, a debate within the UXO sector was sparked by clearance operations on land that had very little ordnance, leading to impressive reports on the number of hectares cleared albeit with little impact on reducing the actual threat to Lao villagers. To overcome this problem, all clearance operators have now adopted the evidence-based survey method to identify areas where clearance is needed.⁵ This method relies initially on evidence such as strike data, incident reports and roving team data to help determine areas that are highly contaminated. Identified areas are then methodically checked for UXO via a technical survey to determine if full-scale clearance operations should proceed.

The evidence-based survey method is already providing planners with more detailed information and allows clearance teams to concentrate their efforts on highly contaminated land. The results during the first 10 months of 2015 are highly encouraging, showing more than double the amount of UXO destroyed per hectare when clearance efforts follow the evidence-based survey.⁶ Planners are using the survey results to create a database of confirmed hazardous areas (CHA) that can be prioritized for clearance. In 2016, an additional grant from the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) is allowing the survey to move forward without pulling resources away from ongoing clearance operations. According to the NRA, the evidence-based survey should be completed in three of the nine most contaminated provinces in 2016, with the remaining six most contaminated provinces targeted for completion by 2020.⁷

In a recent presentation to a UXO Sector Working Group Meeting, NRA Director General Mr. Phoukhieo Chanthasomboune noted that there are already 3,000 CHAs awaiting clearance, amounting to three-to-four years of work.⁸ This is in stark contrast to the early days of clearance. When MAG deminers first began working in Xieng Khouang Province in 1994, they were confronted with vast areas of UXO-contaminated land that defied definition. As clearance operations began, the deminers created small islands of cleared land in the midst of fields, villages and hillsides that were still littered with varying levels of UXO.⁹ For years, clearance teams kept detailed records of areas cleared and the amount of UXO destroyed, yet they were without a clear picture of the size of the total task. To now be able to clearly define specific areas of highly contaminated land throughout the country and prioritize them for clearance is a big step toward creating a realistic assessment of the scale of the problem along with a timeline and budget for completing the task.

Still to be factored into the survey and clearance tasks ahead are the provinces with lower levels of contamination such as Phongsaly, Oudomsai and Bolikhamxai, where lethal ordnance still threatens villagers and hampers economic development. Just one piece of UXO in a garden are enough to create a risk, and a child killed while digging up bamboo shoots is a loss that can traumatize an entire village. The growing optimism present among planners who see real progress in the big picture is likely not felt in these areas where help is yet to arrive.

A European Union report highlights the dynamic of population movements as another complicating factor in making land safe for Lao villagers.¹⁰ Population growth along with economic development initiatives such as mining, hydro-power and forestry sometimes result in people moving into areas that include highly contaminated land. These factors make it imperative that economic development and poverty reduction initiatives be coordinated with UXO clearance at all levels so that villagers can earn their livelihood in safety.

Year	# of Casualties
2015 (First 10 months)	38
2014	45
2013	42
2012	56
2011	99
2010	117
2009	134
2008	310

Figure 2. UXO casualties in Laos, 2008-2015. Information sourced from the *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*, 2011-2015. Figure courtesy of the author.

Victim Assistance

One of the more important progress indicators for the UXO sector is the number of UXO casualties. Thankfully, as shown in Figure 2, the number of new victims has decreased significantly over the past years.⁴

This decline in casualties can be attributed to several factors. Clearance removes lethal ordnance from the land and reduces the number of potential encounters that villagers may have with UXO. In addition, MRE helps children recognize UXO and understand the dangers it poses. Risk education was formally included in the national school curriculum in 2014, although the production of resources is still limited.⁶ Villagers also know that when they find ordnance on the surface, they can call a roving team to safely destroy it.

While the number of new casualties has clearly dropped, the estimated number of survivors of UXO incidents that still live in the country was 15,000 in 2012.⁴ Many of these survivors will need medical, rehabilitative and/or psychosocial services over the course of their entire lifetime.

Through funding from PM/WRA, World Education, Inc. provides comprehensive case management for UXO incident survivors in Xieng Khouang Province via a Victim Assistance Support Team (VAST). In addition, all UXO survivors in Laos are eligible to have transportation and medical costs reimbursed through their war victim's medical fund. Once informed, VAST members visit UXO incident survivors and their family members in the hospital. The fund covers per diems for family members to stay with survivors while in the hospital and covers the cost of initial and ongoing care and treatment. Support is also available for much needed home renovations to better accommodate the survivor.

There are challenges, however. Villagers cannot access the fund if the medical system does not communicate the need,

and survivors in rural areas face very difficult transportation obstacles. In these situations, survivors do not always receive the care they need.

The same reality is true for survivors needing artificial limbs and other rehabilitative services. The Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) works with the Lao Ministry of Health Center for Medical Rehabilitation to increase access to quality prosthetic and orthotic services in Laos. COPE receives funding from the Leahy War Victims Fund administered by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as funding from the governments of Australia, Canada and Norway, and from private donors, both institutional and individual. Five rehabilitation centers are located in Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Savannakhet, Champassack and Vientiane Provinces. Accommodation at these centers is provided by the Lao government while COPE reimburses survivors for transportation costs and a family caregiver; however, Laos' rugged terrain and poor transportation infrastructure are formidable barriers to overcome.

In response, COPE established an outreach program (COPE Connect) in 14 provinces, forming a network of 700 health officials at provincial and district levels to assist with clinical field trips to assess the need for prosthetic and orthotic devices. In addition, via funding from the U.S. and Canadian governments, COPE hopes to begin a three-year program of mobile clinics in 2017. Of the approximately 500 patients who received prostheses via COPE's services, more than a third were UXO survivors.¹¹

Through support from France, the Netherlands, Norway and the European Union, HI administers a comprehensive UXO threat reduction project that includes survey, clearance, risk education and victim assistance. In Savannakhet Province, HI's victim assistance work supports people with disabilities from all causes, including UXO accidents. Support includes livelihood training and coaching, disability rights and equality training, along with help in overcoming barriers to necessary medical and rehabilitation services. HI's work with victims is beginning to focus more on entire communities made vulnerable by UXO as well as on the economic and social integration of these communities into the broader society. HI supports the development of a national disability policy that is inclusive of UXO survivors' needs by working with the National Committee for Disabled People and Elderly and the National Regulatory Authority.

Another area of significant need is the issue of psychological trauma, but Laos is not yet sufficiently equipped with trained personnel for this area. A level of psychosocial and



The author and Bua la, National Bomb Removal Project Director, survey unexploded cluster munitions in a pasture near Phonsavan, Laos (1994).
Photo courtesy of Mennonite Central Committee/Titus Peachey.

peer support is provided by the World Education, Inc. in Xieng Khouang Province. The Quality of Life Association, a Lao NGO, helps by providing skills training for survivors who need to adjust their means of livelihood. In addition, social stigma is often associated with disabilities, which is an issue that HI addresses through its victim assistance work in Savannakhet Province. This requires broader work within family systems and the general public to create a supportive and encouraging environment so that everyone can thrive, regardless of physical limitation.

The NRA initiated a Survivor Tracking System designed to provide an ongoing survey of all survivors' needs. By the end of 2014, data from 10 provinces was entered into the database. Furthermore, the NRA adopted a new Victim Assistance Strategic Plan in 2014, addressing the comprehensive needs of survivors, but implementation of the plan is lagging, particularly at the local levels due to a number of reasons including a lack of trained personnel and proper equipment, difficult transportation and poor communications infrastructure.

Funding and Political Relations

In the early years of the UXO sector in Laos, the effort was determined and innovative yet bore no connection to the scale of the problem. Initiated in 1994 with private funding

from the Mennonite Central Committee, the work quickly gained the attention of governments and other larger donors. However, funding was cautious and capacity was small. By 2000, funding from governments totaled only US\$6.6 million. The United States was the highest funder that year, contributing almost \$1.5 million dollars.¹²

Funding for clearance in Laos began to rise sharply in 2010, and in 2014, there were contributions from 13 different nations plus the European Union. Japan, a non-belligerent in the war has been a major funder. Since 2010, the U.S. contributions have more than tripled and now make up nearly half of the total.⁴

PM/WRA supported the work of the following implementing partners in FY 2014: Catholic Relief Services, The HALO Trust, Health Leadership International, MAG, NPA, Spirit of Soccer, Sterling Global and World Education, Inc.¹³ USAID's Leahy War

Victims Fund provided funding to the Cooperative Orthotic Prosthetic Enterprise.

Funding increases from the United States are attributed to several factors:

- Concentrated education and advocacy initiated by Legacies of War, especially among members of the Lao diaspora in the United States. A speaker's tour planned by Legacies of War and funded by PM/WRA brought a Lao UXO survivor and a deminer to 12 U.S. cities in 2013. Repeated contacts with congressional champions, letters from former U.S. ambassadors to Laos and the dedication of congressional and State Department staff resulted in a growing commitment to complete the task in Laos.
- Warming political relations between Laos and the United States were also important. Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Laos in 2012 and met a UXO survivor while touring the COPE Center in Vientiane. Deputy National Security Director for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes visited Laos in 2015, as did Secretary of State John Kerry in January 2016. Laos' chairmanship of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) brought the Lao Prime Minister to the United States for an ASEAN Summit



A cluster bomblet lodged in the dike of a rice paddy in Nanou village, Laos (2005).
Photo courtesy of Mennonite Central Committee/Titus Peachey.

Meeting in February 2016, and President Obama will visit Laos during the ASEAN meetings in September 2016.

- Appropriations language in the U.S. Congress gives priority to clearance operations in areas where the ordinance is of U.S. origin. In a visit to Laos in October 2015, Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes remarked, “The U.S. created this problem. We have a moral responsibility to help clean it up.”¹⁴

Conclusion

For Laos, the next two decades are critical. Will this new survey methodology and clearance operations extend to all the affected provinces? As the true scale of the problem becomes clear, will funding remain strong? Will comprehensive care for UXO victims and their communities be integrated into a national strategy for all who struggle with disabilities? On the cusp of so much promise, it is essential that the commitment on the part of donors does not waver and that the United States continues to be the leading donor. The capacity and technical expertise are in place. The opportunity to resolve this legacy of war has never been clearer. ©

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Titus Peachey was co-director of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) program in Laos (1980-1985), and returned to help set up the humanitarian demining program (1994), along with (MAG) Mines Advisory Group and the Lao government.

Peachey retired from MCC in 2016 as the director of peace education. Peachey currently serves as Chair of the Legacies of War Advisory Board.