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Interview with Lloyd Feinberg from the Leahy War Victims Fund

The Leahy War Victims Fund is one of the world's leading contributors to the treating and rehabilitating survivors of armed conflict. The Fund has supported the successful passage of disability related legislation in Vietnam, and is working for similar results elsewhere. In Africa, The Leahy War Victims Fund is spearheading the ambitious Omega Initiative, which aims to bring various types of aid to the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Lloyd Feinberg represents the Fund on many fronts; he is widely respected and recognized as both an authority and a humanitarian.

Lloyd Feinberg, for right, discusses victim assistance options with medical personnel.

Interview

David Hartley (DH): Please describe the UXO situation in Laos. What has the LWVF done to alleviate this problem?

Lloyd Feinberg (LF): In Laos, there is a massive amount of unexploded bombs. There was a very high yield of cluster bombs in Laos. Landmines are not such a problem, but instead an infestation of unexploded ordnance, especially in those areas along the old Ho Chi Minh trail. Both the Xiang Khouang province and the Houa Phan province were heavily affected areas, and the issue is that many people who explore those UXO have generalized trauma. Of course, if a child picks one up, it is often fatal. As opposed to landmines, which are meant to cause limb-loss, UXO cause more general and extreme trauma.

People are dying as a result of infections and as a result of inappropriate or inadequate first response treatment. So our focus has been to strengthen the capacity of the district and provincial level health services to deal with UXO related trauma.

The program has been a very unusual one, in that rather than relying on technical expertise from the United States to provide training, the program decided to work with and access local expertise from the Lao medical community in the country's capital, whereby the country's best local doctors and other medical professionals would participate and work with the provincial medical professional. In a country where language fluency is so important—Lao is not a very common language—we found this approach to have been very innovative and effective. The [program] is implemented by "The Consortium," led by World Education and World Learning. The program also develops, disseminates and utilizes UXO and mine awareness materials which have been so effective that the government and other organizations in Vietnam have requested access to those materials. These materials that were developed in Laos are now being widely and effectively used in the Vietnamese awareness program.

LF: Speaking of Vietnam, the LWVF has had a lot of success there. In the situation in Vietnam similar to the one in Laos?

LF: No, in Vietnam landmines are more rare. There are also less of UXO as well, of course, but the major issue there is landmines. After the war, there were estimates of up to 250,000 amputees, which is really an extraordinary number. Therefore the program in Vietnam has been focused on strengthening the capacity to provide prosthetics. Although in the last two years we've made a shift to focus more on orthotics, which addresses people who—a result of injuries or diseases such as polio—have a need for bracing. Generally, there are 8-10 persons requiring bracing [orthotic devices] for every person requiring a prosthesis.

DH: The Fund helped pass disability related legislation in Vietnam. How was this accomplished?

LF: To me, this was one of our greatest successes. We'll take credit as much as we can, but really the credit should go to an American NGO called Vietnam Assistance for the Handicapped [VNAH]. It was through amazing insight and vision from the head of VNAH—a Vietnamese individual who left right after the fall of Saigon—that it was accomplished. He accessed expertise from a large community of people in the United States who were involved in the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). We arranged for a number of visits to Vietnam of technical experts and advocates in the United States who were effective in passing the ADA. We also arranged for return visits by different types of officials from Vietnam, bringing them over to the United States. There were a number of different exchanges, and [the passage of this legislation] was probably one of the most remarkable successes that has been supported by the Leahy War Victims Fund program.

For a country like Vietnam, with all the other issues that they are facing, for them to focus on the issue of disability and to pass such an excellent law, is remarkable. And now we're in the stage of providing technical assistance to help them implement and enforce the law. They didn't stop with just the passage of the law.

DH: Has the Leahy War Victims Fund had similar success elsewhere in the world?

LF: How we yet? No—Vietnam is the only country where have had success in passing laws. We are proposing and hoping to do similar kinds of activities, though, especially in Africa, under the Omega Initiative. In Sierra Leone, we supported a series of visits by disabilities experts, both from other third world countries and the World Health Organization, in order to launch a process of developing a national policy and national standards for disability programs. We hope to replicate this in other countries in Africa.

DH: You mentioned the Omega Initiative; what is it, and how will it help rehabilitate Sub-Saharan Africa?

LF: Essentially the Omega Initiative is a platform from which we hope to launch a number of rehabilitation activities and programs throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. The US NGO, PACT, manages this initiative with technical supervision provided by Veterans International [VI]. The Omega Initiative employs technical experts working full time, based in Nairobi. The objective is to identify countries where there are great needs for war victims and people with disabilities, and to identify local indigenous organizations to work on guilt with their new prostheses.
Helping Hands in a Shattered Republic: Victim Assistance in Chechnya

Chechnya has endured over eight years of grueling combat with Russia. Thousands of landmines have been sown throughout Chechnya and the victim toll is constantly increasing. Victim assistance throughout the Caucasus has become an essential element of rebuilding the lives of those affected by landmines.

by Hayden Roberts, MAIC

The humanitarian response the ICRC has provided to the area of the northern Caucasus is admirable. Not only does the ICRC deliver food and other surdy goods to the IDPs, they also ensure that these people have adequate access to chlorinated water, provide medical assistance to hospitals, encourage mine awareness, and work with other national organizations and societies. In the republic of Chechnya, the ICRC focuses on vulnerable groups in Grozny, Shali, Gudermes, Argun, Umar Martan, Akhokh Martan and Kusialoy.

In addition to the delivery of these goods, the ICRC has revived the population of Chechnya in other ways. A water pumping station in Grozny has been restored and now delivers chlorinated water to the population of the city from two tanks. However, this supply is only enough to cover the needs of about 57,000 citizens.

The ICRC assists medical care structures in various ways as well. Donations of medical supplies and drugs have been made to nine different hospitals in Chechnya. A substantial amount of surgical equipment was also provided to these hospitals during the month of April. On March 1, 2002, the ICRC began a primary health care program. This project ensures that 23 primary medical care facilities in Chechnya are providing health care that they need as ICRC specialists monitor the hospitals. In April and May 2002, the medical facilities supported by ICRC donations carried out 3,381 consultations and 1,506 of these cases concerned children. Mobile medical teams have also been introduced in Chechnya. These teams, consisting of two doctors (a general practitioner and a pediatrician), a nurse and a driver, give "basic medical advice and, if needed, distribute medicine."

Mine awareness programs attempt to teach groups of people the dangers of landmines. As IDPs begin to move through the republic, the threat of injury becomes imminent. It is for this reason that awareness is an important facet of victim assistance. Mine awareness has already been applied to many of the IDPs living throughout the Caucasus—with a close focus on children. The Chechen republic faces a long road ahead of them, in terms of the landmine crisis. Therefore, this is an essential method for reducing the risk of being killed or maimed by landmines.

An example of effective mine awareness program has been implemented in Chechnya via the ICRC. To target the youth, a puppet show called "The New Adventures of Cheerdig" went on a tour in the republic between February and May this year. Eighty-eight performances were brought to 3,481 children in schools in the Groznoevsky Selkhoz, Shali, Nothai-Yuravsky, Ugar-Martanovsky and Gudermes regions. This puppet show has also been performing at the Graphic Arts Department of the Pedagogical Institute to help out with design ideas for mine awareness billboards. A Chechen children’s magazine, "Gildyashka," has expressed the desire to work alongside the ICRC to help push mine awareness information and advice to the youth. The ICRC’s attempts to assist the