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Vietnam is one of the many countries plagued by perilous landmines and UXO. During the Vietnam War (1959–1975)—and to a lesser extent in other conflicts in the region—landmines were used in border conflicts to threaten the enemy and 30 years later continue to threaten the country. As a result, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have used international funding to excavate and deactivate landmines in an effort to stabilize the environment. With aid from international organizations, many families have been resettled, new equipment has been purchased, new job opportunities through victim assistance programs have opened and many hectares of land have been made safe.

Landmine Problem

Approximately 350,000 to 800,000 tons of landmines and UXO are leftover from the Vietnam War. There may be as many as 3.5 million landmines in Vietnam, affecting all 61 provinces in the country. Between 1975 and 2000, Vietnam officials recorded 104,701 mine/UXO casualties killing over 38,000 people. Currently, casualty rates number between 1,200 and 3,000 people a year. According to Chuck Meadows, the executive director of PeaceTrees Vietnam, “UXO accidents come mainly from farming, scrap-metal collecting and meddling with the ordnance items.”¹ From 1975 to 2002, the Vietnam army cleared 1.2 billion square meters (463.32 square miles) of land and destroyed four million landmines and eight million items of UXO. The majority of these mines are located in Quang Tri, Quang Binh and Thua Thien-Hue provinces, located in central and south Vietnam.

Quang Tri province. The effects of the Vietnam War have severely starved the land and its people. Because of a high landmine/UXO concentration, much of the soil in Quang Tri is not viable for cultivation, resulting in an insufficient food supply. From 1966 to 1975, Quang Tri was literally showered with bombs and chemical devices until the land and forested areas were completely destroyed. Since the end of the war in 1975, more than 500 children have died and 4,000 have been injured due to landmines and UXO in Quang Tri alone.

Quang Binh province. Quang Binh province is also a heavily mined area of Vietnam. Located north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), this area is composed of large portions of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was used by the North Vietnamese to direct troops and equipment to fight the South Vietnamese and U.S. armies. During the war, this area was also used as staging grounds and logistical bases for troops and equipment moving south. As a result, this area is contaminated with mines and UXO.

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Thua Thien-Hue province. According to the *Landmine Monitor Report 2004*, local mine-impact assessment surveys recorded that 35 percent of the citizens of Quang Tri and Thua Thien-Hue are unable to use their land due to landmine contamination. Thua Thien-Hue is closest to the DMZ bordering Quang Tri. Similar to Quang Binh, this area was used for strategic purposes during the war such as hosting several U.S. military bases. Many parts of this province, particularly areas close to the western mountains, were subject to heavy fighting and are currently threatened by leftover landmines.

Mine Action Accomplishments

Meadows believes significant demining progress in Quang Tri province is under way. He says, “I am encouraged that the UXO/mine casualty rates in Quang Tri province have decreased significantly since 1995 when PeaceTrees Vietnam began its international humanitarian work. There remains, however, much to be done in the areas of clearance and disposal of UXO and in mine risk education for children and families.”¹ Organizations such as PeaceTrees Vietnam have made a significant impact on the country’s landmine crisis. Since 1998, NGOs have worked to clear more than 12 million square meters (4.63 square miles) of land. In addition to PeaceTrees Vietnam, organizations such as Landmine Survivors Network (LSN), Mines Advisory Group (MAG), Clear Path International (CPI), the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Vietnam and the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAFA) have made significant contributions toward restoring the quality of life in Vietnam.

Landmine Survivors Network. LSN functions as a translator, relationship-builder, planner, researcher and recruiter for humanitarian demining in Vietnam. Workers have translated the

Surviving Limb Loss mine risk education series of pamphlets and other educational materials into Vietnamese for distribution to survivors and their families. LSN also introduced amputees and other landmine survivors to local service providers to build a community support network. In addition to relationship-building, LSN is actively involved with planning mine action. LSN workers meet with local officials as well as representatives from demining organizations to better understand where their services and activities are most needed.

As a part of its planning, LSN conducts comprehensive research on current services offered in affected communities. Based on its findings, LSN creates and improves plans for mine action that reflect a specific area’s needs. As the final step, LSN attempts to recruit people from the community to join the demining efforts. Employing local landmine survivors at LSN not only gives the organization an insider’s perspective, but also benefits the economic status of the people of Vietnam.

Mines Advisory Group. MAG sponsors ongoing projects in Quang Tri, Quang Binh and Thua Thien-Hue to clear mines and UXO, repair damaged roads and schools, dig ditches for irrigation, and help create areas for agricultural and fish farming. Overseeing the projects, MAG Vietnam also manages a mine action team that responds to emergencies related to mine and UXO accidents. As a result of their aid, MAG completed a two-and-a-half-year project in 2002, clearing 150 hectares (0.58 square mile) on one site in Gio Linh district, which is located within Quang Tri province. MAG has also signed a \$620,000 (U.S.) two-year agreement with Quang Tri to operate a local mobile UXO clearance team.

Clear Path International. In 2000, CPI began its mine action work in Vietnam, initiating

the largest bomb clearance project of its kind by an American organization. Since then, CPI has assisted more than 650 landmine accident survivors in 10 provinces. Clear Path provides full victim assistance services in Quang Tri and Quang Binh provinces. In five additional regions, the organization provides medical outreach support; CPI hopes to eventually be able to offer comprehensive services in these areas as well. Emergency medical care, hospitalization, surgery, long-term health-care support, prostheses and physical therapy are made available in the provinces directly to the north and south of the DMZ. In Quang Tri and Quang Binh, CPI offers scholarships for children who have parents injured by landmines or have been injured themselves. Currently, CPI focuses on victim assistance and hospital support programs as well as works to create a specialized prosthetics clinic.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. The VVMF, responsible for organizing efforts to build the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington,

D.C., has since adopted mine action projects in Vietnam. In 2000, VVMF founder and president Jan C. Scruggs created Project RENEW™ to begin identifying and clearing leftover landmines/UXO. JoAnn Mangione, director of communications for VVMF says, “The program includes landmine removal and also educational programs for children and adults so they can better identify the dangers in their own backyards.”² Recently, Project RENEW™ launched a mushroom-growing project to provide sustainable employment and incomes for victims of mines and UXO in Trieu Phong province. According to Mangione, “In 2004, [the U.S.] Congress allocated VVMF \$5 million to expand the work into other areas of Vietnam.”²

UNICEF Vietnam. Mandated by the United Nations General Assembly, UNICEF Vietnam works toward a mine-safe country by organizing mine action projects. Recently, the organization has initiated mine risk education for adults and children as well as assessed the overall impact of

mines/UXO on the land, communities’ knowledge of the landmine threat, and the effect of mine/UXO accidents on survivors and their families. Nguyen Thi Thanh An, a child injury prevention worker for UNICEF Vietnam says, “Until recently, with the exception of a limited number of schools in Quang Tri province’s Trieu Phong district, UXO/mine risk reduction education was more or less non-existent in Vietnam’s schools. UNICEF has therefore supported the development and introduction of a primary school safety and injury prevention manual in 15 provinces.”³ In addition, UNICEF Vietnam has produced and distributed 8,500 mine/UXO warning signs as well as designing and erecting billboards with the same message.

Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. VVAF works to raise awareness about the impact of landmines in Vietnam and advocates for a global ban on anti-personnel mines. To date, VVAF has fitted hundreds of thousands of prosthetic limbs for landmine victims around the world including those in Vietnam. In 2002, VVAF introduced a new program that increased training for rehabilitation staff in orthotics and prosthetics. Currently, VVAF is working toward a more holistic rehabilitation program that would include not only prosthetic assistance, but also social reintegration to allow a full recovery for those with mobility disabilities.

Conclusion

The existence of landmines and UXO causes a constant state of fear and anxiety in Vietnam. The Vietnamese people often “follow their footsteps” and rarely veer off an explored path to venture into unfamiliar land. The goal to educate the Vietnamese people has the potential to prevent casualties by instilling a sense of caution and knowledge about the real dangers of landmines and UXO. Conscious of the hazards, the Vietnamese are assured by meeting deminers and attending mine risk education classes. According to Nguyen, the next five years in Vietnam will bring improved “national response to mine action through better coordination among relevant ... organizations and agencies and improved technical skills and knowledge of mine action.”³ ♦

See “References and Endnotes” on page 108

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