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Claiming the Future

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UXO Lao

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The Lao People’s Democratic Republic has the distinction of being, per capita, the most heavily bombarded nation in the world. As a result of the broader conflict in Indochina during the 1960s and 1970s, Laos was the scene of extensive ground battles and intense aerial bombardment.

From 1946 until 1975, over half a million bombing missions were carried out over the country, and as a result, over two million tonnes (2.2 million tons) of bombs were dropped.1 Based on its experience over the last ten years, UXO Lao estimates that up to 30 percent of all ordnance may remain undetonated, leaving a lethal legacy that continues to kill, maim and impoverish over 30 years later. This explosive ordnance included vast quantities of unexploded large bomblets, anti-personnel landmines and improvised explosive devices lying around. UXO Lao found 25 percent of the total villages were contaminated with UXO in Laos.2

Bombing records provided by the United States Air Force in 1996 gave an estimate of 6.75 million tonnes (7.4 million tons) of ordnance dropped failed to detonate on impact, leaving a lethal legacy that continues to kill, maim and impoverish over 30 years later. This explosive ordnance included vast quantities of unexploded large bomblets, anti-personnel landmines and improvised explosive devices lying around. UXO Lao found 25 percent of the total villages were contaminated with UXO in Laos.2

In 1995, the United Nations Development Programme, UNICEF and other stakeholders supported the Lao government in establishing UXO Lao. At the same time, a international trust fund for humanitarian mine action was established under the auspices of UNDP Lao. UXO Lao initiated operations in the province of Xieng Khouang in 1997 with the support of the Mine Advisory Group (UK), and it now operates in nine of the most heavily impacted provinces in the country. In each of these provinces, UXO Lao established a provincial office and extensive field operations, and is assisted by a number of international implementing partners—currently, three: MAG UK, Norwegian People’s Aid and Handicap International, which provide field-based technical advisors.

Provincial operations reflect the generic principles of humanitarian mine action. Clearance operations may involve a wide variety of teams that destroy ordnance lying on the surface and reported by villagers, and area clearance teams that detect and destroy buried items, which often inhibit development and infrastructure projects. Survey activities provide crucial operational information through the provision of detailed maps that help to prioritise work and monitor provincial progress against the baseline 1997 Impact Survey. Training and capacity-building, both formal (at the National Training Centre) and on-the-job, are also an integral part of the programme, and Lao trainers and international technical advisors deliver them. UXO Lao also implements community awareness activities that seek to raise new awareness among rural communities of the continued dangers of UXO and to educate villagers on ways to minimise the risks caused by UXO through behavioural change.

The Lao National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao)

UXO Lao is also currently developing, with its partners, the Lao National Strategic Plan for the UXO Programme.3 In 2003, UXO Lao embarked on an ambitious programme of restructuring and reforms that would allow it to:

1. More than double its yearly productivity (for example, from approx. 900 hectares² of land cleared per year to 2,000 hectares/year, within a five-year timeframe).
2. Introduce new UXO clearance techniques and methodologies.
3. Speed up the “indigenisation” of the organisation, with progressively decreasing reliance on international advisers.
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The achievements have been impressive since the promulgation of the Strategic Plan. Through the streamlining of support functions (administration, logistics, procurement and finance), overall productivity of the area clearance capacity has increased from 886 hectares² per year in 2002 to over 1,250 hectares per year in 2004—an increase of nearly 42 percent. Similar increases in productivity are noted in the number of bombs destroyed through roving tasks and in community awareness activities.

The next three years will be crucial as UXO Lao embarks on a more in-depth review of its operational procedures, analysing and improving the way it actually clears and releases land and the way it deals with unexploded ordnance. This review may recommend the introduction of new methodologies and new techniques/technologies best suited to the Lao context. The findings could lead UXO Lao to completely modify its approach to humanitarian mine action, to better serve the strategy of national and provincial authorities, and to better support the socio-economic development of the country.

In 2003, UXO Lao launched a major initiative to strengthen its capacity in the key areas of support to operations, including human resource, administration, finance, logistics and procurement. Through a combination of specific activities aimed at both the development of sound and transparent procedures and the development of the capacities of personnel involved in these functions, it was originally estimated that UXO Lao’s productivity could at least double within a two- to three-year timeframe. Experience of the last year confirms this assessment, and still greater improvements could be introduced by the end of 2006 when the quality management initiative is expected to be completed.

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**Endnotes and References**

**Mine Free: Not Anytime Soon, Kidd [from page 4]**

Endnotes


8. USAID’s Perspective: The Importance of Social and Economic Developing Strategies for Humanitarian Mine Action, Feiring [from page 49]

**The War Goes On, Yosburgh [from page 27]**

Endnotes

1. From the 2004 Nagro Declaration by States Parties to the Ottawa Convention.


3. From the 2005 Landmine Monitor. International Campaign to Ban Landmines [from page 46]

4. From the 2005 Landmine Monitor. International Campaign to Ban Landmines [from page 46]

5. From the 2005 Landmine Monitor. International Campaign to Ban Landmines [from page 46]

6. From the 2005 Landmine Monitor. International Campaign to Ban Landmines [from page 46]

7. From the 2005 Landmine Monitor. International Campaign to Ban Landmines [from page 46]