

HIDDEN DANGER: UNCOVERING THE UXO PROBLEM IN LAO PDR

EDITORIAL

The "Asia Brief" series aims to inform development practitioners and the public about innovations, results and impacts of the Swiss development cooperation in Asia. It highlights, in particular, past and present efforts to improve aid effectiveness through partnerships between Swiss agencies and local partners. Discussions and lessons learnt from these experiences are expected to further enhance our common goal of reducing inequalities and poverty in Asia.

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While People's Democratic Republic of Lao (Lao PDR) is still one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, it has experienced significant economic growth and socio-economic development in recent years. The demand for land suitable for agriculture, industry and infrastructure – such as roads, schools, hospitals, and water supply systems – is quickly rising. However, much of the land in Lao PDR is not safe to use.

One of the biggest challenges to the country's development is the more than 80 million unexploded bombs, which were left scattered across the land after the conflict in Indochina in the 1950s and 70s. These unexploded ordnances (UXO) still pose a serious danger and continue to injure and kill civilians today, almost 40 years after the conflict ended.

CLEARING THE LAND, ONE BOMB AT THE TIME

Since 2006, Switzerland has contributed USD 7.8 million to the clearance of UXO in Lao PDR. The support has resulted in more effective and efficient work by the national UXO clearance operator; in improved coordination and planning in the sector; and in increased attention to the UXO problem in Lao PDR from the national government and the international community.

For decades after the Secret War ended, little attention or priority was given to clearance of UXO. It was only in 1996 that the Lao government, in partnership with a number of development organizations, established a UXO clearance program and founded the national clearance operator, UXO Lao.

Since then UXO Lao has worked to clear land and educate communities about the dangers of UXO. With support from Switzerland, UXO Lao has invested in more technologically advanced equipment, such as detectors and vehicles, which has made operations much more productive and efficient. During the period 2006 to 2012, the amount of land UXO Lao cleared per year increased by 86 percent, from 1,500 hectares to about 2,800 hectares, without any increase in staff. During these seven years, UXO Lao cleared more than 19,419 hectares of land and destroyed almost 509,330 UXO items in nine different provinces.

Most of the land cleared by UXO Lao is now used for agriculture, while other areas are utilized for construction of roads and other infrastructure. Removal of UXO, which are found close to villages and other dwellings, is prioritized. The clearance operations performed by UXO Lao between 2006 and 2012 have benefited nearly one million people.



Lao technician searches for UXO items in Xiang Khuang Province, Lao PDR

A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT

Seventy five percent of the people who live in Lao PDR rely on agriculture for income and food security. The demand for agricultural land continues to grow, as the population increases and ethnic groups are migrating from the highlands to lower-lying areas. Foreign investments in commercial agriculture have put additional pressure on the available farmland.

But more than 87,000 km² of land – this is twice the size of Switzerland – is contaminated with UXO. The presence of UXO makes use of the land for agriculture and other activities either impossible or very dangerous. Deadly accidents are still frequent but due to UXO clearance have decreased from 302 in 2008 to 52 in 2012. Many of the victims are farmers, who accidentally trigger unexploded bombs, when they work in their fields.

The provinces most affected by UXO are also the poorest, as the presence of UXO prevents people from farming the land. Without agriculture, many families experience food shortages and cannot develop sustainable livelihoods.

Switzerland's contributions to development in Lao PDR are made in support of the Lao Government's goal to graduate from the UN-classified group of Least Developed Countries by 2020. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) funds a number of projects, which aim to improve human security, safeguard natural resources, foster sustainable economic growth and reduce poverty. As these goals cannot be realized without ridding the land of UXO and establishing a safe environment for development, Switzerland considers support to the Lao UXO clearance program a necessary and indispensable priority.

THE SECRET WAR

Lao PDR is one of the most heavily bombed countries in history. During the Secret War, from 1964 to 1973, two hundred million tons of ordnance was dropped on the nation. This is more than was dropped over Europe during the Second World War.

Like the Vietnam War, the Secret War was also a result of the conflict between the communist North Vietnam and the

United States. North Vietnam and the communist Pathet Lao fought in an attempt to promote communist ideology. The US, Thailand, and the Royal Lao Government opposed the communist forces. While some of the fighting took place on the ground, between US-trained Hmong guerrilla forces and the North Vietnamese army, Lao PDR was for the whole nine-year period subject to heavy bombardments.

The ordnance dropped included general-purpose bombs and chemical bombs as well as cluster bombs, which exploded above ground and spread many smaller bombs, or "bombies", over large areas. A total of 270 million "bombies" were dropped on the country. Eighty million of these, an estimated 30 per cent, failed to explode. Most of these unexploded "bombies" are still littered across the land and pose a serious threat to the people living there.



Unexploded ordnances (UXO)

PREVENTING ACCIDENTS AND SAFEGUARDING HUMAN LIVES

More than 50% of UXO-related accidents involve children. Eighty million of the bright-colored, tennis-ball-sized “bombies”, formally named BLU-26, failed to explode. Tragically, many accidents happen when children by mistake play with the colorful “bombies”. Other accidents occur when children purposefully gather UXO items in order to make a small income selling the bomb fragments as scrap metal. Since the war began in 1964, more than 50,000 Laotians have been injured or killed in accidents caused by UXO, and more than 20,000 of these casualties occurred in the post-war period.

Today, UXO Lao, in addition to its clearance operations, conducts community awareness activities, which educate villagers on how to prevent accidents with UXO. Mine risk education, which includes instructions not to touch anything unusual on the ground, is now part of the curriculum in primary schools across the country. Since beginning of its operations, UXO Lao has reached more than 2.4 million people through community awareness activities in more than 9,600 affected villages.

BETTER PLANNING AND COORDINATION

When UXO Lao was established in 1996, the organization had the dual mandate of implementing clearance operations and coordinating clearance efforts at the national level. However, after a review of the sector in 2003, the Lao Government for-

mulated the first national strategic plan for UXO clearance. The plan called for the establishment of a separate institutional body to focus solely on governance of the clearance work.

The National Regulatory Authority (NRA) on UXO/Mine Action Sector was founded in 2006 with support from Switzerland. This inter-ministerial body has improved planning, coordination, regulation and monitoring of the UXO clearance work, as it provides a much-needed platform for clearance operators, donors, and government representatives to work together. Representatives from nine Lao ministries hold seats on the NRA board. They ensure that the NRA's priorities for the UXO clearance sector are in alignment with national development strategies, and they have contributed to the revised national plan for clearance work, the UXO Sector Strategic Plan 2010–2020.

The Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA), an online database created by the National Regulatory Authority, has also played a significant role in making clearance work more effective. The database contains valuable information, such as historical bombing data and statistics on casualties. In the past, data on contamination levels and clearance progress was hosted by the many different operators, which made it difficult for government and donors to tell how much and where progress was being made. Today, the online database, which was developed with support from the Swiss Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining and the Swiss Ministry of Defence, allows the NRA to aggregate accurate information on the occurrence and removal of UXO on a national level.

Lastly, the NRA, in addition to improving coordination, planning and quality control has given the Lao Government greater ownership of the UXO clearance work. The removal of UXO is a nation-wide challenge, which will require hard work and a sustained focus for many years to come.

FOCUS ON THE UXO PROBLEM

For decades after the Secret War, the problem was hardly addressed, but more recently the Lao government and the

international community have become more attentive. National ownership, achieved through the establishment and successful work of the NRA, is critical to ensure that efforts to eliminate the UXO threat are sustainable. Given the magnitude of the UXO problem, assistance from external donors will continue to be needed.

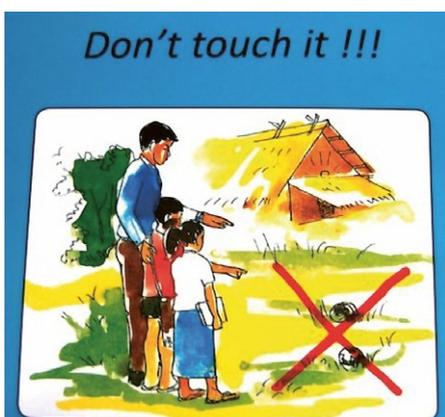
Also with the support of the NRA, Lao PDR ratified the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM). The Lao Government has been actively participating in the international movement to ban cluster munitions known as the Oslo process. The international treaty prohibits the use, transfer, and stockpiling of cluster bombs. By sharing its painful experiences of being one of the most UXO-affected nations in the world, Lao PDR has been able to direct the international community's attention to the ongoing tragedies caused by cluster munitions. The treaty entered into force on August 1, 2010, and Lao PDR was the second nation to sign, taking a preliminary and important step to ensure that other nations will not suffer from UXO contamination in future.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Looking ahead, the biggest challenge to freeing Lao PDR from UXO is the extent of the task. Since beginning operations in 1996, UXO Lao has cleared over 26,639 hectares of most severely contaminated land, or approximately 0.28 percent of the total contaminated area. This achievement took 16 years to accomplish and carried a total cost of more than USD 75 million, to a large extent provided by international donors.

“The demand for clearance is bigger than we can satisfy. In this province alone, communities request clearance of 5,000 hectares of land each year, and we only have resources to clear 500 hectares”, said Mr. Kingphet Phimmavong, Provincial Coordinator for UXO Lao in Xieng Khuang Province.

UXO Lao currently has just over 1,100 people employed in its clearance operations. They work in teams that have different responsibilities, such as surveying contaminated land before clearance, responding to immediate clearance needs, carrying out strategically planned UXO



removal, and conducting community awareness activities. The dangerous work performed by UXO Lao demands highly qualified professionals and is both time-consuming and costly.

A consequence of the Secret War, unexploded ordnance is still scattered across Lao PDR, threatening lives and livelihoods. While the Lao Government acknowledges the importance of clearing land for agriculture and other development, it is struggling to provide the resources that this task requires. Ironically, one of the biggest obstacles to the advancement of the national economy, which would facilitate clearance work in Lao PDR, is the UXO problem. Continued support for the national UXO clearance programme is necessary for Lao PDR to eradicate poverty and to ensure the safety of its people.

SWISS COOPERATION IN THE MEKONG REGION

Swiss Development Cooperation in the Mekong Region is active through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and through the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO).

The assistance of Swiss Development Cooperation for the Mekong Region aims to reduce poverty, to support equitable and sustainable development, to foster democratic governance, to improve agriculture and food security, and expand vocational education and training in the region.

SDC has been active in the Mekong Region since the late 1960s, and the region has been a priority focus since 1995. Approximately CHF 42 million is invested per year.



Links

SDC: www.sdc.admin.ch

SDC Mekong: www.swiss-cooperation.admin.ch/mekong/

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