Indiscriminate Weapons

Cluster bombs are designed as anti-personnel, anti-armor weapons, but the primary victims have been innocent civilians. More than 95% of known cluster bomb victims are civilians and one third are children, who are drawn to the small, toy-like metal objects.  

Cluster bomb casings release hundreds of bomblets—the size of a soup can or orange—over wide areas, frequently missing intended military targets and killing nearby civilians.

Commonly used cluster bombs are designed to explode into hundreds of pieces of razor-sharp shrapnel that rip through bodies. They are deadlier than land mines.

Anywhere from 5% to 20% of modern cluster munitions do not detonate upon impact (this rate rises to 30%-50% for older bombs used in the second Indochina War), leaving a deadly hazard for years to come.

The Legacy of Cluster Bombs in Laos

Laos has suffered more than half of the confirmed cluster munitions casualties in the world.  

Over the past four decades, only a tiny fraction of the bomblets that failed to detonate have been cleared. All 17 provinces in Laos, and 41 of 46 of the poorest districts in Laos, are burdened with unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination.

Consider the Following:

It costs approximately $1,200 to clear up to one hectare (2.5 acres) of land. As a starting point, the government in Laos has identified 124,270 hectares (310,675 acres) of high-risk contaminated lands, including areas in and around villages, agricultural lands, and infrastructure. About $150 million would cover the clearance costs in these high-priority areas.

The U.S. has contributed from $2.7 to $5 million a year for UXO removal in Laos, in comparison to the $17 million (today’s dollars) a day, or a total of $57 billion (today’s dollars) that the U.S. spent bombing Laos for nine years.

From 1964 to 1973, the U.S. dropped over 2 million tons of ordnance over Laos in 580,000 bombing missions, the equivalent of one planeload every 8 minutes, 24 hours a day, for 9 years. At least 270 million cluster bomblets were dropped as part of the bombing campaign; up to 80 million failed to detonate.

Data from a new survey completed in Laos indicate that UXO, primarily cluster bombs, have killed or maimed as many as 50,000 civilians in Laos since 1964 (and 20,000 since 1974, after the war ended). Each year there continue to be close to 300 hundred new casualties in Laos. About 40% of accidents result in death, and 40% of the victims are children. Boys are particularly at risk.
Recent Use of Cluster Bombs

2008  During their recent conflict, both Russia and Georgia used cluster bombs.

2006  Israel dropped up to 4 million cluster bomblets in Lebanon; the Hezbollah organization fired 4,407 bomblets into Israel

2003  The U.S. dropped 1.8 million cluster bomblets in Iraq

2001-2002  The U.S. dropped 248,056 cluster bomblets in Afghanistan

Hopeful Steps

The Convention on Cluster Munitions - prohibits the use, production, transfer and stockpiling of cluster munitions. The international agreement, signed by 106 nations to date, received final ratification in February 2010 and takes effect in August 2010. The U.S. has not signed the treaty.

2010: A Year of Action on Cluster Bombs

House/Senate Bill: The Cluster Bomb Civilian Protection Act (S 416, HR 981) awaits passage in Congress. This bill would restrict the production and use of cluster munitions by the U.S. A permanent ban on cluster bomb exports from the U.S. was passed in the Senate in March 2009.

2010 U.S. Budget: The United States Congress directed that “not less than $5 million shall be made available for unexploded ordnance removal in Laos,” which would represent a sizable increase in funding for UXO removal in Laos over FY2009. The Congress also directed the State Department “to plan for similar or higher funding levels for these purposes in subsequent fiscal years, similar to that proposed by the Senate.”

A House Appropriations Subcommittee held the first ever hearing on the issue of UXO in Laos in April 2010, helping to educate members of Congress on the issue and increase support for additional funding for UXO clearance in Laos.

Former U.S. ambassadors to Laos sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on July 15, 2010 asking for a dramatic increase of funding for UXO removal in Laos.

What Can You Do?

- Urge your Congressional representative to ensure that at least $7 million is allocated for UXO clearance in Laos for FY2011 with substantial increases over the next ten years. $7 million in 2011 would represent a modest but important increase over previous funding levels, and subsequent increases to $10 million per year over the next 10 years are necessary to adequately address the UXO problem in Laos.

- Encourage your Congressional representative and the U.S. State Department to attend the November meeting of States Parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions in Laos. Ask the U.S. to announce a long-term commitment to clearance and victim assistance in Laos, including a significant increase in funding for UXO removal and victim assistance. Encourage the U.S. to sign the treaty to ban cluster munitions.

Visit: www.legaciesofwar.org

4. Senate Congressional Record, May 14, 1975, pg. 14, 266.