LEGACIES OF WAR

Cluster Bombs in Laos

Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell

ABSTRACT: In this article nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell discuss the massive illegal U.S. bombing of Laos between 1964 and 1973 and its lingering human, economic, and ecological toll. They survey the history of foreign intervention in Laos, with special emphasis on the cold war-era civil war and U.S. intervention. The authors describe continuing civilian casualties and obstacles to development posed by unexploded ordnance (UXO) in Laos, and detail current efforts for UXO removal. The authors propose a formal reconciliation process between the United States and Laos in which the U.S. government would accept responsibility for the long-term effects of the bombing and the governments would cooperate with NGOs and the United Nations in a transparent process to fund UXO removal.

More than thirty-five years ago the U.S. government inflicted a tragic injustice on the people of Laos, an injustice that has never been fully acknowledged or rectified. The U.S. government funded an illegal, covert bombing campaign that killed tens of thousands of innocent civilians and left the small nation of Laos burdened with a deadly legacy that lives on today. Unexploded ordnance (UXO) contaminates close to half of the country and has killed or maimed thousands of people, while severely hampering efforts to eliminate poverty and hunger. The story of the “secret war” in Laos has long been overshadowed by events in Vietnam and Cambodia. It is time for this story to be told so the suffering can end. It is time for the United States to do, finally, what is morally right and make Laos whole again by fully funding the removal of UXO and providing victim assistance.

Between 1964 and 1973, the United States released 2.1 million tons of ordnance over Laos and on numerous occasions bombed the civilian population.
in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions on war to protect civilians and the 1954 Geneva Accords and 1962 Geneva Agreements that prohibited the presence of foreign military personnel or advisors in neutral Laos. The U.S. military justified the bombings as necessary to counter the illegal presence of North Vietnamese troops in Laos, but the response was vastly disproportionate. At the astonishing rate of one bombing mission every eight minutes, twenty-four hours a day, for nine years, the United States dropped more bombs on Laos than it had dropped on all countries during World War II. U.S. bombing left the tiny nation the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world and resulted in mostly civilian casualties. After the war ended, up to 78 million unexploded cluster bombs and other ordnance remained, posing a constant threat to civilian life.

During the war, in an attempt to stop the Pathet Lao communist insurgency and to interrupt Vietnamese supply lines along the Ho Chi Minh trail (which ran through southeastern Laos), the U.S. military and CIA trained and supplied the Royal Lao Army, recruited Laotian people for covert operations on the ground, and carried out bombing strikes and reconnaissance flights under the guise of civilian contractors delivering humanitarian aid. These activities not only violated the neutrality of Laos but were also conducted without the knowledge or authorization of the U.S. Congress. The secret war in Laos would eventually be exposed during U.S. Senate hearings in 1971, but details did not become known until State Department memorandums were declassified years after the war ended. However, the severity of the bombing was not revealed until President Bill Clinton authorized the release of U.S. military strike data in 2000. U.S. records, recently released under the Freedom of Information Act but not yet reviewed, contain new data that may reveal even higher levels of bombing. CIA records on the war in Laos still remain classified.

In June 2007, a speech made by U.S. State Department official Richard Kidd substantiated the long-term civilian casualties and impacts in Laos. Calling it the “Laos exception,” the U.S. government acknowledged that no other country in the world had suffered the long-term harm from cluster bombs that was inflicted on the people of Laos. However, Kidd’s comments stopped short of suggesting the United States take responsibility for its role in the secret war or that it fully fund the cost of bomb removal.

UXO continues to kill or injure close to three hundred people each year and poses a major impediment to economic development. Laos remains one of the poorest countries in the world. The formal cleanup of cluster bombs and other explosive remnants of war began in 1994, but moves at a snail’s pace: more than

1. Senate Congressional Record 1975, 14, 266.
2. The civilian population is protected under the Geneva Conventions and these protections are not affected by the presence of combatants in the population (Protocol I, Article 50, Section 3). These protections include the right to be free from attacks, reprisals, acts meant to instill terror, and indiscriminate attacks. Civilian populations must not be used as civilian shields (Protocol I, Article 51); see 1949 Geneva Convention II, in Reisman and Antonioni 1994.
33,669 square miles are contaminated, covering at least 37 percent of the country (50 percent by some estimates), yet at current funding levels only five to six square miles are cleared each year. The lack of sustained attention to the issue has resulted in a lack of political will to expedite removal. U.S. contributions to the effort have been modest at best, due to strained relations between the governments of the United States and Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) in the past. And the problem of UXO in Laos has received scant media attention, aside from three notable exceptions — the highly acclaimed 2002 documentary film *Bombies* by Jack Silberman, the 2007 Australian film, *Bomb Harvest*, by Kim Mordaunt and Sylvia Wilczynski, and Mark Eberle’s 2009 film *The Most Secret Place on Earth: CIA’s Covert War in Laos*.

Recently there has been renewed interest in the issue, as the Laotian diaspora becomes more engaged with its former homeland and recognizes that cluster bombs pose a major obstacle to the safety of the population and economic development in Laos. Additionally, the use of cluster bombs in recent conflicts in the Middle East has triggered awareness of the harm these weapons cause; this has prompted an international effort to ban cluster munitions worldwide. On May 30, 2008, at a gathering in Dublin, Ireland, 107 countries, including Laos, agreed to the text of the Cluster Munitions Convention, banning the use, sale, and stockpiling of cluster munitions and ensuring humanitarian assistance for victims and affected communities. The parties, who met throughout 2007 and 2008, gathered in Oslo, Norway, on 3–4 December 2008, to sign the convention. Under the Bush administration, the United States was not a party to the discussions or negotiations and did not sign the convention.

**A History of Conflict**

From its early warring kingdoms to recent times, Laos has been shaped by periods of relative peace and prosperity interrupted by protracted wars that led to subjugation and exploitation by outside interests. Western countries first recognized modern-day Laos as an independent nation in 1954. Current borders evolved from the French colonial period of 1893–1954, when administrators consolidated three Lao kingdoms into a province within French Indochina.

**The Lao Kingdoms**

The early history of Laos is closely integrated with that of its neighbors — the countries that today are Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China. For hundreds of years the sparsely populated region was divided into small settlements and then into larger kingdoms or vassal states. Borders continually shifted as kingdoms fought to control fertile rice lands along the river valleys, the people that farmed them, and other natural resources. It wasn’t until 1353 that the kingdom of Lan Xang, “Land of a Million Elephants,” was established by

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7. See http://www.eastsilver.net/taxonomy/term/518.
Chao Fa Ngum, encompassing an area twice the size of modern-day Laos. The kingdom had close ties with the neighboring Tai kingdoms of Lanna and Ayutthaya. Lan Xang lost power and territory after invasions by the Vietnamese in 1449 and the Burmese in 1563. For strategic reasons King Sysathathirath moved the capital from Luang Phrabang to Vientiane in 1560, but Luang Phrabang remained the seat of the royalty. Ongoing struggles and incursions slowly depleted the Lao population and destroyed most of the wealth, palaces, and Buddhist temples.

At the start of the eighteenth century Lan Xang was divided into three kingdoms: Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak. A period of peace and prosperity followed until the Burmese raided the region once more in the 1760s. The weakened Lao kingdoms became tributaries of Siam in 1779, and in 1828 the Siamese (present-day Thai) army ransacked Vientiane and burned the city to the ground. The kingdoms remained under Siamese control until the French arrived in the late 1800s.

**French Colonization**

French colonization of Indochina began in Vietnam and Cambodia during the 1870s and gradually expanded into Laos. In 1893, the French forced Siam to cede power over the three Lao kingdoms for all lands east of the Mekong River. Siam retained control over the more populated farmlands west of the river, although portions of the west bank were later granted to Laos. The only royal court that remained as part of the new French province resided in Luang Prabang. The French recognized this kingdom as a protectorate rather than as a colony.

Economic development in French Indochina focused on Vietnam and Cambodia, where larger populations, more accessible natural resources, and coastal ports allowed viable export markets to enrich France. Landlocked Laos remained a relative backwater, an afterthought. Infrastructure investments in Laos were concentrated on road construction, access along the Mekong River, and telegraph lines, which attempted to connect Laos with economic activity in Vietnam and Cambodia. But these projects were unsuccessful in stemming the trade that naturally flowed between Laos and Thailand.

A 1907 census reported 585,285 people living in Laos. The lack of an adequate labor force presented a major constraint to French economic development. The French maintained a monopoly over the opium trade, which provided more than half the annual revenues for the provincial government; other French business ventures in mining, timber harvesting, and coffee and tobacco plantations met with only minor success.

While economic progress remained limited, French social reforms slowly introduced modernization and Western ideas to Laos. The Lao kingdoms had been highly stratified societies with diverse ethnic populations, from the low-

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10. Ibid., 24–29.
land Lao and other Lao-Tai groups to Mon-Khmer groups, such as the Khamu, and highland ethnic minorities, including the Hmong and Mien. For centuries, lowland Lao kings and a small group of educated Lao ruled over the population of subsistence peasant farmers. In some cases, slavery and forced labor existed. Buddhist temples served as cultural centers of lowland Lao life for religious and educational purposes, as monks provided formal education to novices and village children.

Under colonial rule, a small number of French officials were posted to Laos in top administrative jobs. The French viewed Laotians as too relaxed and unreliable and brought in educated Vietnamese to fill mid-level government posts. Soon over half the population in urban areas was Vietnamese. A large number of Chinese also settled in cities and towns to run businesses and trade. The French abolished slavery but imposed corvée, a form of forced labor that required farmers to build roads and other public facilities. The vast majority of Lao people remained rural farmers.

The French continued support for education in the Buddhist temples, but later built French-language elementary and secondary schools in the larger towns. The schools catered to Vietnamese settlers and the privileged lowland Lao. Wealthy families sent their children to Saigon or Hanoi for higher education and, in some cases, to Paris. Toward the end of the colonial period, schools began to serve a broader population. Over time, upland and highland ethnic minorities gained limited access to education, along with greater social standing and freedoms. Exposure to the wider world and ideas of equality and independence fostered interest in a Lao identity and a free nation. Changes to the social order during the French period undermined traditional cultural and economic relationships and highlighted resentments and tensions between different segments of society, which carried over into the years of independence and civil war.

War and Independence

World War II brought changes to every corner of the world, including Laos. A vast area west of the Mekong River, known today as Isan (population now over 25 million) was ceded to Thailand as a result of the 1940 Matsuoka-Henry Pact, which ended the Franco-Thai war. Portions of the Xieng Khouang region were annexed by the Vietnamese, portions of the south went to Cambodia, and China claimed considerable influence along the northern border.

Once France fell to Germany in 1940 and war erupted in the Pacific in 1941, Japanese troops occupied French Indochina, primarily in Vietnam and Cambodia, but also with a minor presence in Laos. Officials from the Vichy French government remained in Laos and coexisted with the Japanese troops. On March 9, 1945, the Japanese overthrew the Vichy French colonial regime, before surrendering to the Allies in August of that year. The Lao Issara (Free Lao movement) formed a government in October and declared Laos an independent nation. 12

12. Ibid., 82–83.
But this was at odds with the Luang Prabang monarchy, which worried that Thailand had ambitions to take over the country and favored a return to a French protectorate. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese communist movement was fostering unrest among Vietnamese residents in Laos, creating tension with the Lao population. As the world divided into communist and noncommunist countries, the United States supported the return of France to Indochina in 1946, and the Lao Issara went into exile in Thailand.

Growing nationalist sentiment within the territories forced France to designate its former colonies as independent states within the French Indochina Union. However, “independent” was a relative term. In Laos, the new constitutional monarchy was run by an elite group of Lao families with the king’s support and considerable French involvement. The struggle for greater independence limped along. In 1949, the French granted Laos the status of a nominally independent Associated State within the French Indochinese Union, while retaining control of foreign policy and defense. The Lao Issara was unwilling to settle for partial autonomy from France, but was unable to agree on how to achieve full independence. By October of 1949, the Lao Issara had split into two factions. The leaders were Prince Souvanna Phouma, who returned to Vientiane to join the Royal Lao Government, and his half brother, Prince Souphanouvong (also known as the “Red Prince”), who joined the exiled Lao resistance, allied with the Vietminh communists against the French and the Royal Lao Government.

In October 1953, the Royal Lao Government was granted full autonomy and the French withdrew in 1954. The early 1950s were a time of great hope, but the fledgling Lao government faced challenges similar to those from the French colonial period. The country still had virtually no means of generating revenue, and most of the population remained subsistence farmers. The country lacked an adequate infrastructure of roads and communications to connect the rural, mountainous provinces with the capital and other towns along the Mekong River valley. At that time there were only one hundred registered vehicles in the country, and telephone service would not reach the provinces until 1967.13

Due to rising Lao hostility and distrust, 80 percent of the Vietnamese population in Laos fled back to Vietnam, leaving a severe shortage of trained administrators and professionals. As the French government no longer supplemented revenues, the new Lao government turned to the United States to provide desperately needed financial aid.

In North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh’s communist organization initiated the first Indochina war in order to oust France from the region. The Vietminh helped solidify a Lao communist resistance, which eventually became known as the Pathet Lao (Nation of Laos). Guerrilla attacks on French troops increased, and in 1953 the Vietminh moved into northeastern provinces of Laos. Intense fighting led to the siege of the French fort at Dien Bien Phu on the Lao-Vietnamese border, where the French had surrendered in 1954.

13. Ibid., 95–96.
The first Geneva Conference in 1954 met to negotiate settlements for civil wars in Korea and Indochina, all part of the growing conflict between Western democracies and the Soviet and Chinese communist governments. The 1954 Geneva Accords established Laos as a neutral, sovereign state and called for the removal of foreign troops. A new coalition government was formed in Laos with the existing government, the Pathet Lao, and neutralists. Communist Pathet Lao forces were allowed to remain in Houaphan and Phongsali provinces in northeastern Laos, while the Royal Lao Government forces held the rest of the country. Some Vietnamese troops remained in Laos at this time, while also training and equipping new Pathet Lao recruits from their base across the border.

During this period Laos, rather than Vietnam, was the focus of U.S. attempts to stop the communist threat. The mission in Laos greatly expanded as the United States supplied arms and training for the Royal Lao Army and large sums of aid to friendly government officials. Many in the Lao elite grew wealthier from rampant corruption and cronyism, while little of the aid trickled down to the peasant population. From 1955 to 1958, the United States provided $167 million in aid to Laos, primarily to the military.\(^\text{14}\) The disparity in aid incensed the rural population and increased their support of the communists.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s American, Soviet, and Chinese interests supported various government schemes as rightist, moderate, and leftist factions — including three royal princes, ministers, and military officers — vied for power. A series of coalition governments formed and fell apart, interrupted by several military coups. Before the May 1958 elections, in an attempt to influence voters the United States started Operation Booster Shot, which disbursed close to $3 million for rural projects. But the elections gave the communists a clear majority in the National Assembly and authority over the coalition government. The United States toppled this government by withholding financial aid.\(^\text{15}\) Once U.S.-friendly leaders were in place, aid resumed. Around this time communist forces began a guerrilla warfare campaign in northeastern Laos.

The communists were believed to hold a wide majority as the next elections, scheduled for April 1960, approached. The United States rigged the elections by increasing aid and buying votes. Exasperated, a Royal Lao Army commander, Kong-Ke, carried out a coup and tried to form a moderate government. The United States supported a counter-coup headed by a rightist leader, Phoumi Nosovan, and sent in U.S. troops to fight alongside the Royal Lao Army. As a result, the neutralists joined the communists and large-scale civil war erupted.

The escalating civil war led to a second Geneva Conference in 1961 and the Geneva Agreements of 1962, which reaffirmed Laos as a neutral state and prohibited foreign bases and troops in the country. But the agreements had little effect on the illegal fighting taking place on the ground. Allegiances shifted, fighting intensified, and “neutral” Laos earned the nickname “Land of Oz,”\(^\text{16}\) as subterfuge and lies created a surreal atmosphere.

\(^\text{14}\) Haney 1972, 53–54.
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid, 253.
\(^\text{16}\) This refers to the fantasy land in the movie *The Wizard of Oz.*
The U.S. role in the civil war developed on three fronts. The United States continued support for the Royal Lao Army, providing training, supplies, and air cover. The American CIA also recruited and supplied Hmong and other ethnic minorities to fight a guerilla war in the jungles behind enemy lines. The Hmong Special Forces, led by General Vang Pao (the only Hmong general in the Royal Lao Army), carried out covert operations against enemy troops and identified positions for American bombers to target. To circumvent the Geneva Agreements, the CIA hired private contractors — Air America, Continental Air Services, and others — and temporarily reclassified military pilots as civilians. The United States maintained that the planes were delivering humanitarian aid, whereas in truth they were delivering arms and supplies and carrying out bombing missions.

At the same time that the United States expanded its military role, an increasing number of Vietnamese troops fought alongside the Pathet Lao with arms and supplies from China and Russia.

By 1963, U.S. involvement in Vietnam had deepened. Laos took a back seat as U.S. policy was largely determined by the need to support efforts in the Vietnam War, an attitude summed up by Secretary of State Dean Rusk: “After 1963 Laos was only the wart on the hog of Vietnam.”

**U.S. Bombing in Laos**

“The airplanes came bombing my rice field until the bomb craters made farming impossible. And the village was hit and burned. And some relatives who were working in the fields without shelter came running out to the road to return to the village, but the airplanes saw and shot them — killing the farmers in a heart-rending manner. We heard their screams, but we couldn’t go to help them. When the airplane left we went to look, but they had already died.” — Laotian villager from Xieng Khouang Province living in a refugee camp near Vientiane, Laos, 1971

Attempts to form another coalition government in 1964 fell apart as two Royal Lao Army generals carried out yet another coup. U.S. Ambassador to Laos Leonard Unger insisted that the new leaders reinstate neutralist Souvanna Phouma as prime minister. In 1964, with Souvanna Phouma’s approval, the United States began flying reconnaissance flights out of bases in Thailand over...
the Pathet Lao–held territories. After a plane was shot down, the United States bombed Pathet Lao positions and began flying armed escorts. From June 1964 to March 1970, the U.S. government denied conducting anything but armed reconnaissance flights; in reality bomber sortie raids over northern Laos (a sortie is counted when the aircraft returns to base for refueling) reached a peak of 405 per day in 1969.

The Ho Chi Minh trail, in reality a network of dirt trails, ran through southeastern Laos, providing a supply line for communist troops fighting in South Vietnam and Cambodia. In December 1964, the United States began a second air-strike program to disrupt deliveries along the trail, yet denied the existence of this bombing campaign as well until two American planes were shot down in January 1965.

Extensive bombing raids over North Vietnam, which began in February 1965, soon overshadowed interest in the bombing of Laos. The United States set up ground-based aircraft guidance systems, manned by U.S. troops and Hmong Special Forces, on mountaintops in Laos to direct bombing attacks over North Vietnam. When bombing missions to North Vietnam were aborted due to weather or enemy fire, pilots often dropped their bombs over Laos rather than go through the complicated procedures of landing with a full load of ordnance back at bases in Thailand.

In 1968, U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson announced first a partial halt and then a full halt to bombing in North Vietnam. On October 31, 1968, he said, “The overriding consideration that governs us at this hour is the chance and the opportunity that we might have to save human lives on both sides of the conflict.”

The truth was very different. Planes that had been bombing North Vietnam were now diverted to campaigns over northern and southeastern Laos. One official was quoted as saying, “We couldn’t just let the planes rust.” From 1968 through 1971, the number of sorties increased dramatically and earlier restrictions on bombing civilian targets were substantially relaxed. In 1967, a total of 52,120 sorties were flown, while in 1969 there were 148,069 — equivalent to a planeload of bombs dropped every 3.7 minutes around the clock for an entire year. The town of Xieng Khouang on the Plain of Jars was completely leveled in April 1969.

From 1964 to 1973, Laos became the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world. During its secret and illegal campaign, the United States dropped 2,093,100 tons of ordnance in 580,344 bombing missions. This equated to a planeload of bombs dropped every eight minutes, twenty-four hours a day, for nine years, and all in a country the size of the state of Utah. The bombings were a direct violation of the Geneva Conventions on war to protect

17. Haney 1972, 265. See also Stevenson 1972, 180.
20. Ibid.
21. Senate Congressional Record 1975, 14, 266.
civilians, as well as the 1954 Geneva Accords and 1962 Geneva Agreements that prohibited foreign military personnel or advisors operating in neutral Laos. The United States has since argued that the presence of North Vietnamese troops in Laos violated the Geneva Agreements and justified U.S. retaliation. The number of Vietnamese troops operating within Laos was difficult to verify and fluctuated over the years, depending on supply movements along the Ho Chi Minh trail and the demands for fighting in Vietnam. Whatever the exact situation was on the ground, the intense and sustained U.S. bombing campaign was a grossly disproportionate response that caused death and devastation primarily to innocent civilians.

For the first time in its military history, the United States utilized a large number of cluster bombs. Cluster bomb casings opened in midair to release, per bomb, six hundred to seven hundred bomblets, each about the size of an orange, over a wide area. The U.S. military strike data released in 2000 was used by Handicap International in a report on cluster munitions use and casualties worldwide, issued in May 2007. The newly tabulated figures indicate that at least 260 million U.S. cluster bomblets were released over Laos during the war — eighty-six bomblets for every person living in the country (the population was approximately 3 million in 1970). This estimate is significantly higher than the earlier one of 90 million cluster bomblets. Clearance teams have found 186 types of munitions, including nineteen different types of cluster bombs.

The U.S. military made a conscious decision to bomb civilian villages, crops, and livestock in addition to military targets in the Pathet Lao–held areas. The goal was to remove all means of livelihood for the communist troops. U.S. strike data reveals that 52.8 million cluster bomblets, or 20 percent of all bombs, were dropped within one kilometer of villages. Hundreds of firsthand accounts by

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Sorties</th>
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<tr>
<td>1964 (June–Dec)</td>
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<td>1965</td>
<td>9,947</td>
<td>15,407</td>
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<td>1966</td>
<td>47,737</td>
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<td>1967</td>
<td>52,120</td>
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<td>78,624</td>
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<td>105,998</td>
<td>453,256</td>
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<td>1971</td>
<td>91,190</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>33,904</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973 (Jan–Feb)</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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Sources: U.S. Military Data, Senate Congressional Record, 18 July 1973, pp. 24519–24522 (with corrections for addition errors in the original data).

survivors tell of bombs dropping on civilians as they ran for cover. There are no reliable figures on the casualties of the war, but it is estimated that tens of thousands of civilians died.

“They were at home. This was before everyone had fled their homes. A big, big bomb set everything on fire. ‘Mother was burned up. Father was burned up. The children were burned up. Everything was burned up.’ There were no soldiers in the village.” — *Account of 1966 bombing by Pho Xieng Onh from Ban Ping in a 1970 interview at a refugee camp.*

“All the villagers were living in holes then. But Tit Van Di went back to the village to get something to take to the holes. While he was in the village the jets bombed before he could flee. There were no soldiers in the village. At that time the planes came many times every day, four or five times even at night. The jets and the T-28’s together. Sometimes the T-28’s would drop the big bombs first and then the jets would drop the bombies.” — *Account of 1968 bombing by Nang Sida from Ban Nasay, in a 1970 interview at a refugee camp, describing how her husband died.*

The bombings were relentless. By 1970, tens of thousands of civilians had died, while thousands more, their homes destroyed, lived in caves or holes in the ground. Another fifteen to twenty thousand were evacuated to refugee camps near Vientiane in the Royal Lao Government–controlled zone. From these refugees, the story of what had taken place began to emerge.

By 1968, the intensity of the bombings was such that no organized life was possible in the villages. The villagers moved to the outskirts and then deeper and deeper into the forest as the bombing reached its peak in 1969, when jet planes came daily and destroyed all stationary structures; nothing was left standing. The villagers lived in trenches and holes or in caves, and they only farmed at night. All informants, without exception, had their villages completely destroyed. In the last phase, bombings were aimed at the systematic destruction of the material basis of the civilian society.

Throughout the war, the U.S. military denied involvement in the illegal bombings and, once they were revealed, denied that civilians had been tar-

26. Ibid.
The truth was eventually exposed in U.S. Senate hearings beginning in 1971. Additional details emerged with the release of State Department documents in later years. What took place in Laos sparked a temporary outcry, but it was soon lost to discord over the wider wars in Vietnam and Cambodia. The U.S. campaign in Laos was later dubbed the “secret war” and, sadly, was relegated to a footnote in history books on the Vietnam War.

With tremendous public opposition at home to the war, the United States decided to pull out of Indochina and signed a treaty with North Vietnam in late 1973.

Sao Chanta (left) told how her husband and three daughters, Sao Bouavan (12), Sao Bouathong (9), and Sao Tui (8), were killed during the summer of 1968 or 1969. She wasn’t sure which year it was. Her husband and the three children had gone to work in a rice field north of their village. They hid in a hole when the planes came, but “the planes dropped big bombs near the hole.” All four were killed by bomb fragments. Sao Chanta said that the planes that dropped the bombs were jets, but she didn’t know which kind. “There were no soldiers in our village when the planes bombed,” she said. (Courtesy of Walt Haney)

A BLU 24 cluster bomb shattered Singin’s left leg. He made his own prosthesis carved from a solid piece of wood. The metal rim at the end of his leg is made from salvaged metal, the source…a BLU 24 bomb casing. He kindly donated his home-made leg to the COPE visitor center in Vientiane, Laos, as he received a polypropylene leg for the first time in 2006 — thirty-six years after his accident. (Courtesy of COPE, which is the only provider of artificial limbs in Laos. Over half of the recipients of the limbs were injured by UXO)
1972. Without American backing, the Royal Lao Government was forced to negotiate an end to war. They formed a coalition government with the Pathet Lao in 1973. Within two years, the Pathet Lao took power of the country and formed the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

Immediately, thousands who had supported or fought on the side of the U.S.-backed Royal Lao Government fled the country in fear of retribution, and many more followed over the years. Since 1975 at least three hundred thousand Laotians, or 10 percent of the population, have left Laos, including most of the educated and professional people. Many lived in refugee camps in Thailand and eventually resettled in the United States, Canada, France, Australia, New Zealand, or other countries. Meanwhile, the people remaining in Laos attempted to resume a normal life.

Living and Dying among the Bombs

“In early 2007, four-year-old Te and six-year-old To were playing near their village, Ban Lathouang, when they found an unexploded bombie. The bombie went off and both children died.” — Manophet, Xieng Khouang Province, Laos

Villagers who fled the fighting and bombing during the civil war returned home only to find the landscape blanketed with unexploded ordnance. Approximately 30 percent of all cluster bomblets dropped on Laos had not detonated, leaving behind up to 78 million unexploded cluster bomblets in addition to thousands of large bombs, rockets, mortars, shells, and landmines. A new survey shows that during the 1970s, approximately fifteen hundred people per year died or were injured by UXO. The casualties declined over time to six hundred per year during the 1980s and three hundred per year during the 1990s and 2000s.

In the past, the Lao government has estimated that at least thirteen thousand civilians, more than 40 percent of them children, have been killed or maimed by UXO since the war ended in 1973. Over half the casualties have been from cluster bomblets (often referred to by the Lao as “bombies”). The small, toy-like objects attract the attention of children, particularly boys, who have the highest incidence of casualties.

Because many incidents occur in remote rural villages without access to health care, a large number of casualties go unreported.

At present the UXO National Regulatory Authority is carrying out a new, nationwide survey of victims of UXO in the Lao PDR, due to the unreliability of older surveys. (No previous survey covered the whole country, or even whole provinces — only the contaminated areas.) Preliminary results indicate that, in

29. Email to Elaine Russell from Manophet, UXO Lao interpreter in Xieng Khouang, 29 August 2007.
the ten thousand villages in the country, there are five casualties per village on average. It is expected that the final result will show at least fifty thousand civilian casualties resulting from UXO since 1964.\footnote{Communication from Michael Boddington, technical advisor for victim assistance, UXO National Regulatory Authority, Vientiane, 15 September 2008.}

Unexploded bombs remain in villages, schoolyards, rice paddies, fields, fruit orchards, bamboo stands, forests, and stream banks. As the population of Laos nears 6.7 million, current agricultural production is proving inadequate. Many farmers must choose between feeding their families and the risks of planting in bomb-laden fields. Projects to provide clean drinking water, irrigation, electricity, health care facilities, schools, and other basic needs cannot go forward until unexploded bombs have been cleared, adding substantially to the costs of development. Reported casualties rose sharply in 2005 with increased scrap metal prices, as desperately poor individuals try to defuse bombs in order to sell them as scrap.

Hundreds of children have been orphaned. Families are left without the main breadwinners and struggle to survive. In addition to the thousands who have died, thousands more have been left without limbs or with other severe injuries. Many disabled fathers and mothers cannot work to support their families. The governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Laos that assist disabled victims do not have enough resources to assist all those in need of artificial limbs or employment retraining.

For more than twenty years, the people of Laos had virtually no outside assistance in removing UXO from the land. The Lao government did not have the

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Table 2 — Summary, Landmine Monitor Reports: Data compiled from all UXO removal operators in Laos}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Data year & Land cleared (sq. kms.) & UXO pieces removed & Reported casualties & \\
& & & (Killed & Injured) & Funding (million $) \\
\hline
1996–2003 & 43.96 & 528,998 & 161'' & 383'' & 54.0' \\
2004 & 19.50 & 75,371 & 66 & 128 & 8.1 \\
2005 & 16.96 & 67,783 & 36 & 128 & 8.1 \\
2006 & 47.09 & 102,198 & 16 & 33 & 13.4 \\
2007 (Jan–June) & 16.25 & 39,186 & 20 & 71 & 5.4' \\
\hline
TOTALS & 143.76 & 813,536 & 299 & 743 & 89.0 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Source: The Landmine Monitor Report is prepared by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

\footnote{Official estimates of 200 to 400 casualties per year continue to be reported, meaning that underreporting could be between 50 and nearly 90 percent. (Landmine Monitor Report 2007)\footnote{Total number of deaths and injuries from 1999–2003 when data collection began.\footnote{Total funding for 1994–2003.\footnote{Annual total for 2007, with $3,575,371 secured and $1,785,597 pledged (by the United States and Germany).}}}}
necessary resources and was wary of outside help. U.S. offers of assistance were tied to the recovery of the remains of American personnel listed as missing in action (MIA). Finally in 1994, the Lao government, the British-based Mines Advisory Group (MAG), and the Mennonite Central Committee initiated a pilot program to remove UXO in Xieng Khouang Province. Two years later, the government created UXO Lao, which works with the United Nations, donor countries, and humanitarian organizations on a national clearance program. In 2004, the National Regulatory Authority was designated to take over monitoring and regulatory responsibilities for the UXO program (although it did not become operational until 2006), while UXO Lao implemented removal in the field. In addition to bomb clearance efforts, the government and organizations such as MAG, Consortium, and Handicap International conduct UXO awareness education in schools and villages in hopes of preventing accidents.

Based on U.S. military strike data and a 1996 Handicap International land survey of Laos\(^33\) it was estimated that UXO contaminates 87,200 square kilometers (33,669 square miles), or more than 37 percent of the country; of that, 12,427 square kilometers (4,798 square miles) are considered high risk, due to the presence of civilians and high concentrations of UXO. However, UXO Lao now estimates that 236,800 square kilometers (nearly three times more than earlier estimates) are at risk from UXO. A total of 2,861 villages (25 percent of the villages in Laos) have reported UXO either in the village or the immediate area.

From 1994 through the first half of 2007, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), donor countries, and a number of independent bomb clearance and humanitarian organizations provided $89 million for UXO removal programs (see table 2, Landmine Monitor Report Summary), beginning with the MAG pilot program in 1994 and the UXO Lao national program in 1996. The average contribution is about $5.1 million annually, with many contributions made in kind (e.g., training, equipment) rather than cash. According to the 2008 U.S. State Department report, *To Walk the Earth in Safety*,\(^34\) the United States contributed $37.5 million from 1993 through the first half of 2007, or an average of about $2.7 million per year. This represents three percent of all U.S. de-mining funding around the world during this period. Proposed U.S. funding for bomb removal in the 2008 budget was only $1.4 million. In contrast the United States spent $2 million per day for nine years to bomb Laos during the war and has spent close to $5 million a year on recovery of MIA remains.

Progress in clearing the land has been excruciatingly slow as bomb removal work is time-consuming, dangerous, and expensive. There are two types of clearance teams. Roving teams respond to requests from villagers and farmers who have discovered unexploded bombs. The teams then detonate or defuse and remove the bombs. It is common for roving teams to be called back to a village numerous times as ordnance continues to be uncovered. Other teams

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34. Available at http://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rpt/walkearth/ (accessed {when?}).
work to clear specific tracts of land. Trained teams go over every inch of land with metal detectors. When a potential bomb is identified, the team carefully digs by hand around the site until the source is found. In many cases, the buried metal turns out to be one of the millions of exploded bomb fragments that are buried in the land as well. Unexploded cluster bomblets are usually detonated, while larger bombs may be defused and removed. Over time, bombs rust and become even more volatile and dangerous.

New equipment is improving the efficiency of clearance work. The United States recently gave Laos fifty metal detectors designed to discriminate between metal fragments and larger live bombs. From 1996 to 2006, removal teams cleared approximately 144 square kilometers of land. This represents only 1 percent of the estimated 12,427 square kilometers of high-risk areas and only four-tenths percent of total contaminated land. UXO Lao reports that 364,290 unexploded cluster bomblets have been removed or destroyed (out of an estimated 78 million), along with 412,153 rockets, shells, and mortars, 1,304 large bombs, and 5,901 mines.35

The Lao government adopted a ten-year strategic plan, “The Safe Path Forward,” to prioritize removal efforts from 2003–2013.36 The objectives are modest: 1) clear no less than 180 square kilometers in nine provinces (just over 1 percent of high-risk areas) over the next ten years; 2) reduce the number of casualties to fewer than one hundred per year; and 3) develop a national database on UXO/mine accidents. The program is based on the expectation that donor funding will remain at about $5.1 million per year and focuses on clearing lands in and around villages.

Unless UXO clearance programs are greatly expanded, unexploded bombs will remain a hazard to life and limb for a large portion of the Lao population for generations to come.

**Development — Still Struggling**

Thirty-five years after the end of war, the Lao government is still struggling to meet the population’s basic needs for food, safe water, sanitation, health care, and education. The UNDP has designated Laos a “Landlocked and Least Developed Country,” one of the poorest nations in the world — and has identified the presence of UXO throughout at least 37 percent of the country as a key challenge to Laos’s development.37 Through the National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2006–10), the Lao government is striving to achieve the internationally adopted Millennium Development Goals by 2020. These goals include the following: (1) eradicate poverty and hunger; (2) achieve universal primary education; (3) promote gender equality; (4) reduce child mortality; (5) improve maternal health; (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; (7)

ensure environmental stability; and (8) develop a global partnership for development. These efforts are seriously inhibited by the presence of UXO.

After the War

When the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP), the political wing of the Pathet Lao, took control of Laos in 1975, the economy was in ruins and the United States stopped providing financial aid. In Xieng Khouang Province and many regions around the Ho Chi Minh trail, virtually nothing remained: towns, villages, fields, and infrastructure had been obliterated. Most of the educated, professional class had already fled the country, and many of the remaining government administrators, Royal Lao military personnel, teachers, doctors, nurses, and businesspeople were sent to reeducation prison camps.

The newly formed Lao PDR immediately instituted a centrally controlled economy and collectivized agricultural land. The exodus of educated professionals resulted in a shortage of capable people to run the government and provide services. For the next ten years, Laos remained an isolated country, closely aligned with and dependent on the Soviet Union and Vietnam for military and financial assistance. After the long and bitter war, the government shunned contact with Western nations, in particular the United States. The Lao PDR suspected that the CIA was supporting ex–Royal Lao military officers and Hmong guerrillas in a continuing armed resistance within Laos and along the Thai border.

The centralized state-run economy was collapsing by the mid 1980s. The disintegration of the Soviet Union starting in 1990 resulted in the loss of two-thirds of the foreign aid to Laos. With few remaining options, the Lao PDR government began to decentralize the economy, to allow private markets, and to seek better relations with Western countries, the UN, and humanitarian organizations. In response to international concerns, the Lao PDR closed most prison camps, adopted a constitution in 1991, and established a legal system. Today, although the people elect members to the National Assembly, there is still only one political party. The ten-member Politburo and prime minister make most decisions.

In recent years, Laos has been slowly engaging with regional and world economic development organizations, joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) in 1997 and applying for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1998. Improved relations with Thailand have led to more open borders and to the construction of the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridges across the Mekong River at Vientiane and Savannakhet, which have increased access to trade and job markets for Lao citizens. Laos continues to strengthen relationships with other nations, including Australia, France, Japan, and India, and maintains membership in more than twenty-five international bodies, including the UN, the WTO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Health Organization. The United States restored full diplomatic relations with


**Laos Today and the Impact of UXO**

Laos has experienced sustained economic growth since 2000 ranging from 5.8 percent to 8.1 percent annual growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is expected that growth will continue at 7.9 percent in 2008. Poverty levels have been reduced in recent years but, according to the UNDP, 32 percent of the Lao population still lived below the poverty line in 2005, while up to 50 percent of rural residents fell below the poverty line.

Approximately one-third of the economic growth in recent years has come from the development of hydroelectric power and mining projects — copper, gold, and tin. Other growth is derived from agricultural crops, industrial forestry, food and non-food processing, and tourism. The rapid economic growth of surrounding countries has created export demand for rice, corn, sugar, coffee, rubber, and metals. Although foreign direct investment is rising, the many challenges Laos faces continue to make it difficult to attract outside private investment.

It is clear from key data on the status of Laos that this is a struggling country. Table 3 presents a comparison of conditions in Laos to those in neighboring countries and the East Asia and Pacific region in 2005–2006. The Lao PDR ranked 130 out of 177 countries in the UN Human Development Index report of 2007–2008, up from a ranking of 148 in 1994. (See table 3.)

The Lao government is heavily dependent on foreign aid and loans from the UN, the World Bank/IMF, the Asian Development Bank, individual donor countries, and sixty-eight NGOs. The external public debt is equivalent to 70 percent of GDP and outside donor assistance represents 77 percent of total capital expenditures while also providing 14 percent of government revenues. In order to alleviate the problems of poverty, major sustainable economic development is needed.

Laos faces major challenges in addressing its economic and social problems, with UXO contamination — which has both direct and indirect impacts — presenting a significant obstacle. The UNDP found that high levels of UXO contamination correlate closely with higher levels of poverty. In a June 2007 presentation, Tim Horner, UNDP senior advisor to the UXO National Regulatory Authority in Laos, stated,

Beyond the humanitarian impact, the presence of cluster munitions in Lao PDR is exacerbating poverty and blocking development. If we look at maps of where the reported accidents occurred, where limb disability statistics are highest, where food insecurity is at its worst and where the poorest and least developed districts are, the impact on development is undeniable. 

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UXO contamination affects the economic and social well-being of the Lao people on many levels — directly through the contamination of the land and casualties incurred, and indirectly by contributing to the perpetuation of poverty, hunger, and a lack of services.

**Food Production** — Because of the rugged mountains covering much of Laos, only 4 percent of total land area, or 9,255 square kilometers, is arable land suitable for intensive agriculture. In addition, only about 20 percent of land in Laos is irrigated, leaving most farmers dependent on rain and, as a result, limited to a single growing season each year. Up to 50 percent of arable land is contaminated with UXO, creating a major impediment to expanding agricultural production. The 2005 National Census of Laos determined the population to be 5.6 million. With a 2.6 percent annual rate of growth, the 2008 population is estimated to be 6.7 million. The rapid rate of growth increases pressure for

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**Table 3. Data from World Development Indicators, World Bank**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population (millions)</th>
<th>Life expectancy at birth (years)</th>
<th>GNP per capita (Atlas # $)</th>
<th>Child malnutrition (%) under weight</th>
<th>Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)</th>
<th>Under 5 mortality rate (per 1,000)</th>
<th>Access to improved water source (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>34,400</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>71</td>
<td>1,630</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>33</td>
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<td>430</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lao PDR</strong></td>
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<td><strong>56</strong></td>
<td><strong>430</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>62</strong></td>
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<td>21</td>
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<td>620</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Most recent year available.

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44. World Bank 2007b.
greater food production. A UN World Food Program report on food security released in 2008 found that 50 percent of young children in rural areas are chronically malnourished. The report noted that no progress has been made on malnutrition in rural areas over the past ten years despite steady economic growth in the country. The problem is most prevalent among ethnic minorities in remote mountain villages. With food in short supply, many farmers are forced to plant fields despite the risk of UXO. The scarcity of food has also increased the hunting of animals for consumption, placing pressure on the forest environment and on endangered species.

Infrastructure — As the only country in Southeast Asia that does not border the ocean, Laos is highly dependent on roads and access along the Mekong River for economic trade and the provision of services. Efforts to provide basic physical infrastructure are hampered by mountainous geography and the fact that, according to the 2005 census, 72.8 percent of the population lives in remote, rural areas. The cost of building basic infrastructure increases substantially when the land must first be cleared of UXO. As a result, Laos does not have adequate roads, transportation systems, communication facilities, electricity, schools, or health care facilities. There are 19,300 miles of roads in Laos, half of which are dirt and become impassable in the rainy season. The 2005 census found that 21 percent of households do not have access to roads.

The controversial 1,072-megawatt Nam Theun 2 Dam project is an example of how the presence of UXO affects capital costs. The World Bank’s International Development Association loaned funds to several of the partners in the project, including the Lao PDR, for this $1.45 billion undertaking. Completion of the dam is scheduled for 2010 with the expectation that electricity sales to Thailand will raise revenues for poverty reduction and environmental protection. The construction of roads, electric transmission lines, and dam facilities for the project involved extensive UXO removal. Mine Tech International spent three years clearing different facility sites. The company’s website states that some of the project areas cleared were the most heavily contaminated lands they have ever encountered. In addition, more than six thousand villagers had to be relocated to make way for the project, requiring additional UXO removal before new villages could be built. As part of this effort, Phoenix Clearance Ltd. has removed more than 4,700 pieces of UXO to date while continuing to clear new areas.

Health Care — Health care facilities in rural areas are either extremely inadequate or nonexistent. Clinics have only rudimentary equipment and supplies, and electricity may only be available — if at all — for a few hours a day. Many UXO casualties occur in rural villages without access to any medical care. The injured are likely to be treated first at clinics, which are often located several hours away and are ill equipped to handle the severity of the injuries. It may take an ad-

ditional three to five hours to reach a hospital with better facilities. The casualties severely tax the inadequate health care system, and because of treatment delays, many people die or suffer worse outcomes, such as the loss of a limb, than they might have otherwise. The preliminary results of the recent government survey on UXO casualties reveals that close to 40 percent of UXO injuries result in upper limb amputations. Additionally, health care is not free in Laos and there is no health insurance. Families of victims must find a way to pay for medical services, which often means selling off livestock and spending what little cash they may have. When family members must spend weeks or months caring for a victim during recovery, they cannot work outside the home, which further depletes the family’s income.

A 2002 report by the National Commission for Disabled People estimated that 6.8 percent of the people in Laos had moderate to severe disabilities.48 Xieng Khouang Province, which has one of the highest levels of UXO contamination, reported 5,298 people with disabilities, the largest number of any province in the country. The Lao National Census of 2005 found that 1.2 percent of the population had disabilities, but in Xieng Khouang Province, one of the most heavily bombed areas, 2.2 percent of the population has disabilities.49

Although there are a number of governmental organizations and NGOs providing disabled services and support, the needs far outstrip resources. The Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) is a joint venture of the Lao Ministry of Health and a number of NGOs, which works with the National Rehabilitation Center and four regional centers. Fifty-three percent of the clients they fit with prosthetic legs were injured by UXO.50

In Lao society, the disabled have often been marginalized, and they face considerable physical and sociocultural barriers. Rehabilitation programs and vocational training for the disabled are not available in most rural areas, making it difficult for victims to work and support their families. Many disabled children are unable to attend school due to lack of mobility and biases about their capabilities.

The Impact of Poverty — In most parts of Laos, the labor force suffers not only a shortage of available workers, but also a lack of training and education. This discourages outside investment in new businesses and industries. Educational opportunities and jobs are most plentiful in population centers such as major cities and towns along the Mekong River in the western part of the country. In sparsely populated rural areas access is often limited to mandatory primary education. High levels of poverty discourage some families from sending their children on to further schooling, as they are needed to work in the fields. In many places, the mere act of walking to school through contaminated lands causes parents to worry about their children’s safety.

Poverty leads to exploitation of the environment as people try to supplement incomes and augment inadequate agricultural production. Legal and illegal log-

ging activities contribute to the degradation of the forests. In 1940, 70 percent of Laos was covered with forests, but by 2002 forests had been reduced to 41.5 percent of the land.\textsuperscript{51} Many rural people are dependent on the forests for non-timber products (e.g., wildlife or bamboo shoots for consumption or dammar resin and cardamom to sell). Newer methods of hunting, such as automatic guns and cable snares, have had considerable impact on wildlife populations. The growing illegal trade in live animals and animal parts with neighboring countries further depletes the existing populations of many endangered species.\textsuperscript{52}

As discussed previously, poverty also prompts people to risk collecting and defusing cluster bombs to sell as scrap metal. As scrap metal prices have risen, so have corresponding UXO casualties.

**Reconciliation — Healing and Hope**

The story of war in Laos, as with all stories of war, contains two separate but converging themes: the physical and emotional tolls of war. Long after the last bomb was dropped and the conflict declared over, the tremors of war have continued. It is said that war does not decide who is right, only who is left. In Laos, war left in its path shattered lives, scattered communities, and lasting devastation. Although the United States restored full diplomatic relations with Laos in 1992, there has been no formal reconciliation process between the countries to heal the long-festering wounds of war.

Since 1975, close to three hundred thousand Laotian refugees have resettled around the world in the United States, Australia, France, Canada, and other countries. Over the years, these refugees have made small gestures toward reconciliation and renewal with Laos. Since the opening of the Lao border in 1986, tens of thousands from among the Laotian diaspora have returned every year to Laos to visit family and hometown villages. Laotian refugees have contributed by sending money to family, sponsoring a child, or raising collective funds to build temples, schools, and other capital projects. Others have organized medical missions, book programs, or scholarship funds. The economic contributions from Laotians living abroad provide support at all levels.

In recent years, the Laotian diaspora and in particular Laotian-Americans have organized efforts to support greater economic and social opportunities for the people in Laos by engaging the government and people of their new homeland. A prime example is the influence of Laotian-Americans in the U.S. government’s extension of normal trade relations to Laos in 2004. The U.S.–Lao Normal Trade Relations National Coalition was instrumental in creating a powerful U.S.-based constituency to advocate for trade policy changes. Since then, members of this coalition have established various business and trade councils to advocate for increased ease in trade and market access between the two countries. This represents a positive step toward reconciliation and collaboration between former wartime antagonists.

\textsuperscript{51} World Bank 2007b, 18.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 23–24.
A new generation of Laotian-Americans — many of whom were too young to remember all the events of the war but remember the suffering and sacrifice of their parents and grandparents — has embraced the unfinished business of ending the devastation in Laos and bringing reconciliation and renewal. One vehicle that is providing momentum for this remarkable undertaking is the U.S.-based organization Legacies of War.53

Legacies of War was founded in 2004 by Laotian-Americans to raise public awareness about the presence of cluster bombs in Laos and to advocate for additional U.S. funding and assistance to address the problem. The organization also supports efforts to ban the use of cluster munitions in other parts of the world. Rooted in the power of history, healing, and hope, Legacies of War was founded to connect the experiences of war and peace across communities, continents, and generations. The project’s unique perspective recognizes the parallel experiences of suffering, survival, and transformation of those who remain on the war-torn land and the refugees who fled. The organization integrates art, culture, education, dialogue, community organizing, and advocacy to bring people together to create healing and hope out of the wreckage of war. This and other initiatives by NGOs and foreign governmental organizations are examples of efforts to bring about reconstruction and reconciliation from the war in Laos.

Principles for Reconciliation

The following are suggested principles for implementing a formal reconciliation process between the United States and the Lao PDR. The problem of UXO in Laos and its effects on the people and country is a humanitarian issue, and requires that the two countries move beyond past political differences.

Accepting Responsibility: The United States has a moral and humanitarian obligation to accept responsibility for the devastation and suffering caused by its unprecedented bombing campaign over Laos and the long-term effects of unexploded ordnance. More than thirty-five years later, it is time to put aside arguments and justifications for why and how the bombings happened and instead focus on the consequences. Residual U.S. bombs continue to kill and maim innocent civilians; UXO contamination exacerbates the problems of poverty, inadequate health care, food production, and degradation of the environment.

Joint Commitment: The United States and the Lao PDR must sit down together in good faith to negotiate a workable plan and agreement for providing assistance that is acceptable to both governments. This will require moving beyond past political differences to find a path for greater reconciliation that puts the welfare of the Laotian people first.

Comprehensive Plan: The first priority must be removal of UXO as quickly as possible from high-risk areas. Important tasks include improved surveys of contaminated lands, prioritization of areas for clearance with enforceable timelines, expanded public education and awareness programs, and greater assistance for people harmed by UXO, such as more medical funding to treat vic-

tims, physical therapy and rehabilitation for injuries, and job retraining. Such programs exist currently but are sorely underfunded. U.S. funding must be sufficient to restore the long-term health and economic sustainability of the people and land in Laos.

**Collaboration and Partnerships:** U.S. assistance to Laos must involve collaborating with existing programs of the Lao PDR, the UN, and other governmental organizations as well as NGOs, such as World Education/Consortium, COPE, Handicap International, Doctors Without Borders, MAG, and others. The assistance plan would involve partnering with existing programs and organizations in order to draw on the expertise of people both inside and outside Laos and the lessons they have learned about which programs are most effective in resolving the problems.

**Transparency:** The funding, administration, and accounting systems for providing assistance must be open and transparent. This might involve oversight from a third party or a joint agency with independent audits, such as the financial arrangement used by COPE.

Designing an expanded program for removal of UXO in the near term will be a complex undertaking. Updated independent surveys are needed to verify areas of contamination, priorities for clearance, and the level of funding necessary to implement the removal program. This effort would build on the National Regulatory Authority’s recent survey of casualties, other data collection efforts, and the strategic plan for UXO. At a minimum, the approximately 12,427 square kilometers of high-risk lands presently identified, which include 25 percent of Lao villages and agricultural, grazing, and public improvement lands, must be cleared.

The cost of clearing UXO can vary widely depending on a number of factors: (1) the quality and quantity of data on contamination; (2) the location and accessibility of the land to clearance teams and equipment; (3) topography and the type of land contaminated (e.g., valleys vs. mountains, grassland vs. forests); (4) the intensity of contamination and types of UXO found; (5) the training level of team members and equipment availability; and (6) administrative costs of program management. Existing removal programs are gaining efficiency with more experience and better equipment, while oversight of funds has become more transparent. These factors, along with the implementation of the risk assessment model developed for the Lao PDR by the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining, will help reduce overall costs.

**Conclusion**

The second Indochina war was a dark and complicated episode in history. Thirty-five years after the end of conflict, too little has been done by the United States to heal the wounds inflicted on the Laotian people and their country. Unexploded bombs pose a constant threat and severely hamper the country’s struggle to build a sustainable economy. The U.S. State Department has acknowledged the “Laos exception” — that, unlike other countries contaminated with unexploded cluster bombs, Laos will require sustained, long-term assistance for removal. What is lacking is a commitment to accept responsibility for
solving the problems. The United States has a moral and humanitarian imperative to fully fund bomb clearance programs and to provide much-needed assistance to bomb victims. Laos has waited too long to be free from the threat of UXO.

The physical and emotional scars of war affect not only the people in Laos, but also the hundreds of thousand of Laotians who fled Laos and are living abroad. Both the Lao nai (Lao inside) and Lao nok (Lao outside) share an interconnected journey grounded in loss and suffering, and leading eventually to survival and transformation. Within Laos some resent the aftermath of war that still confronts them in their daily lives, while others look forward to renewed relations with former enemies. Likewise, for some in the Laotian diaspora, there is still anger over the loss of their former lives and their country, while others return regularly (some permanently) and contribute to the development of Laos.

Now, a new generation of the Laotian diaspora is reconnecting with their homeland and bringing attention to the plight of the people affected by cluster bombs, hoping to create a future free from further harm and suffering. Additional momentum around this issue has been reinforced by the signing of the aforementioned Cluster Munitions Convention, an international treaty to ban the use of cluster bombs worldwide, which is supported by 107 countries, including Laos, and hundreds of NGOs.

It is time for the United States and Lao PDR to put aside past differences in order to forge a path of reconciliation for the good of the Laotian people, who deserve to live free of fear and to have their country made whole again.

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