LAND OF A MILLION BOMBS

LAOTIAN REFUGEES REACH OUT TO AID THEIR WAR-TORN COUNTRY.

Writer $anti Suthinithet
LAOS IS HISTORICALLY referred to as "Lan Xang," the land of a million elephants. Today, it would be more accurate to call it the land of a million bombs.

From 1964 to 1973, as part of the Secret War operation conducted during the Vietnam War, the US military dropped 260 million cluster bombs — about 2.5 million tons of munitions — on Laos over the course of 580,000 bombing missions. This is equivalent to a planeload of bombs being unloaded every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, for nine years — nearly seven bombs for every man, woman and child living in Laos.

It is more than all the bombs dropped on Europe throughout World War II, leaving Laos, a country approximately the size of Utah, with the unfortunate distinction of being the most heavily bombed country in history.

Bounthus Phommasathit is a survivor of the bombing who immigrated to the United States with her family in 1978. She still vividly recalls the destruction of her village.

"I remember all the circumstances," she said, "I saw horrific things. I saw the bombing. I saw the bodies. I was born during the Vietnam War in December 1967, so I observed and experienced the bombing when I was starting elementary school. I was in Xieng Khouang province, the most heavily bombed area in Laos. I remember we hid in the bombing shelter underground."

Nearly half of Laos is now contaminated with unexploded ordnances (UXOs), explosive weapons such as bombs, grenades and land mines. Cluster bombs, explosive weapons that work by ejecting hundreds of smaller submunitions over a wide area, make up the majority of UXOs that plague the country. Cluster munitions pose an especially grave danger to civilians, according to Handicap International, a non-governmental organization (NGO) specializing in the field of disability, because they are "highly imprecise and indiscriminate" weapons designed to "scatter explosives over swaths of land often hundreds of yards wide."

Of the 260 million cluster bombs dropped by the United States, up to 30 percent of them failed to detonate. These bombs were released on targets in a large shell or casing. Each of the casings contain approximately 600 to 700 small bomblets, or "bomblies," as they are often called in Laos.

There are now close to 78 million unexploded bomblets littering rice fields, villages, school grounds, roads and other populated areas in Laos, hindering development and poverty reduction. More than 34,000 people have been killed or injured by cluster munitions since the bombing ceased in 1973, with close to 300 new casualties in Laos every year. About 40 percent of the accidents result in death and 60 percent of the victims are children. At this time, less than 1 percent of the UXOs have been cleared.

Laos was officially recognized as a neutral country during the war. However, some top Washington officials, fearing Communist influence and the North Vietnamese transport of troops and weapons to the south through Laos, prepared and executed a

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— Khambang Sibounheuang, war veteran
clandestine war. Lao civilians found themselves being bombed relentlessly by a foreign superpower and bore the brunt of this indiscriminate bombing campaign.

"The [American] airplanes flew over our heads and surrounded the cities. They thought they were bombing the Viet Cong, but they mostly killed civilians," Phommasathit said. An estimated 350,000 Laotians lives were taken throughout the course of the bombings.

Meanwhile, all of this was concealed from the American public as well as many other members of government. Toward the end of the war, hundreds of thousands of Laotians, like Phommasathit, became refugees, desperate to flee the carnage and instability that was consuming their country. According to the Library of Congress, after 1975, an estimated 10 percent of the population — about 360,000 Laotians — resettled in other countries, including the United States.

Almost four decades after the bombings have ceased, the children of the first wave of immigration to the United States have now become adults and the Laotian diaspora continues to come into its own as a relatively new part of the growing Asian American community, where its population totals 400,000.

Emerging from this generation are people who, working with a broad range of individuals and organizations both in the United States and Laos, are seeking to address this history of war and its implications — and to finally end the unnecessary loss of lives caused by the bombs.

At the center of many of these efforts is Legacies of War, a Washington, D.C.-based organization advocating for the clearance of unexploded bombs in Laos. The founding of Legacies of War in 2004 was due largely to the rediscovery of a collection of historic artwork by Laotian refugees who were victims of the American bombings.

Between December 1970 and May 1971, Fred Branfman, an American educational advisor, and Bougene Luangpraseuth, a Laotian man, collected illustrations and narratives in the refugee camps of Vientiane, the capital of Laos, where bombing victims had fled. This artwork — executed in pencil, pen, crayons and markers — documented the lives of the bombing victims and bore witness to the atrocities they experienced on a daily basis. The illustrations were known only to a small and select circle of people and were thought to be lost forever. No one had seen them since the end of the war.

Decades later, they surfaced at a fortuitous meeting between Legacies of War Executive Director Channapha Khamvongs and John Cavanagh, currently on leave from his position as director of the Institute for Policy Studies, which is a prominent progressive think tank in Washington. It turned out that Cavanagh had kept the drawings safe for over 25 years; he knew that they would be of significance one day and was waiting for the right opportunity and person to come along. That person turned out to be Khamvongsa; through her, the illustrations were returned to the Laotian
American community and that action in turn inspired her to form Legacies of War, where much of the art is now housed.

Khamvongsa came to northern Virginia from Laos with her parents when she was 7 years old.

"When we were in the refugee camp, I remember being told by others in the camp that once we got to America, all our dreams would come true," she said. "We believed the streets were lined with gold and that everyone was so rich they would never have to wear the same clothes twice."

Realizing those dreams were myths didn't diminish her enthusiasm. "As I got older and with every experience, I realized that the 'American Dream' wasn't uniform — that each of us contributed to the American Dream. And most importantly, we have the opportunity to shape it."

Visiting Laos as an adult, she was humbled by those who risked life and limb to clear the unexploded bombs. "We are very privileged, those of us from Laos who were able to grow up and be educated in America," she said.

To Khamvongsa, this is something that should not be taken for granted. She argues that there is a shared responsibility in the Laotian American community to keep moving forward, to continue to innovate and to encourage progress.

Khamvongsa's trip back to her homeland made a lasting impression. "There is nothing like passing through the lush countryside of Laos and seeing the awe-inspiring views of the green mountains and flowing river and seeing the naturally integrated villages so full of life," she said. "Much of Laos today is what one would imagine it was like hundreds of years ago: beautiful, serene and breathtaking. One can't experience the beauty of this land and the decent people [who] live and depend on it without wanting to make sure the land is safe for generations to come."

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Bombing survivor Phommabath settled in Ohio with her family in the late 1970s and dedicated her time to providing assistance to other newly arrived Laotian refugees. In 1991, she began a series of almost-annual trips back to Laos.

During her first trip, she visited a hospital that was in extremely poor condition with serious shortages of medical supplies and decrepit, outdated equipment leftover from the Vietnam War era. She decided at that moment that she wanted to help. Upon returning to the United States, she wrote a letter to the Vietnam Veterans Association. "I hoped to find someone who had damaged my country," she said.

The veteran who responded, Lee Thorn, was one of the soldiers who loaded the bombs that were dropped on her village in Laos when she was a child; he was battling post-traumatic stress disorder. The two eventually founded the Jhai Foundation, an or-
ganization that provides communication services and facilitates economic development for rural communities in Laos, as well as in Thailand, Vietnam and India. Their first project together was reconciliation work — digging wells, renovating schools, distributing medical supplies, setting up computers — in the Xieng Khuan village that Thorn helped to bomb.

Thorn continues to do victim assistance work and travels to Laos frequently, and both he and Phommasathit are connected with Legacies of War. To say that the two have become like brother and sister would be an understatement — Phommasathit’s parents officially adopted Thorn in 2000.

Khambang Sibounheuang served as a commander in the Royal Lao Army and fought alongside US forces against the Communists in Laos. He is a proud American who has remained active in military service as a volunteer in the Tennessee State Guard. Sibounheuang is frank about the toll the bombs continue to take on Laos, where the vast majority depends on subsistence farming: “The Lao people suffered greatly because of the bombings. The people cannot [work] their lands for a living because they are afraid the bombs will explode at any time. We need this to be resolved.”

This year has seen a series of encouraging developments, including the ratification of the international Convention on Cluster Munitions, which bans all use, production, transfer and stockpiling of cluster munitions and commits countries to clearing contaminated areas and providing victim assistance. Over 100 countries have signed on and it recently became binding international law.

The United States has not yet signed on to the convention, although in 2009, President Barack Obama signed a law banning almost all exports of US cluster munitions. Many involved in cluster bomb clearance work are encouraging the Obama administration to join or at least send representatives to the convention’s first meeting in Vientiane later this year.

Another major milestone was the first congressional hearing on UXOs in Laos and subsequent American funding for their removal held by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in April. Khamvongsa spoke on behalf of Legacies of War, along with representatives from the State Department, the Humpty Dumpty Institute, a nonprofit focused on humanitarian issues, and the Mines Advisory Group, an organization that provides assistance to countries affected by UXOs. The hearing was chaired by Rep. Eni Faleomavaega of American Samoa and joined by Rep. Mike Honda of California.

Honda traveled to Laos earlier this year as part of the first delegation composed of Asian American congressmen to do so. “I will never forget our visit with officials responsible for overseeing bomb-clearance work in Laos. What I learned shocked me,” he said.

Honda, now a vocal advocate for US assistance in Laos’ bomb removal, said: “During our meetings in Laos, we learned that about 1,000 workers are destroying ordnances and leading education programs throughout the country. The bomb-removal program in Laos is effective and efficient, called the “gold standard” by the State Department’s own Weapons Removal and Abatement Office. The removal process works, but it is expensive and more funding is needed now to prevent more casualties.”

During the proceedings, witnesses recommended increased US funding for UXO clearance in Laos. Khamvongsa suggested at least $7 million in 2011, followed by an annual commitment of $10 million over the next 10 years — which in total amounts to less than what the United States spent in one week bombming Laos. These requested funds would strengthen and expand the scale of the UXO sector’s work.

“The US spent $17 million a day [in today's currency] for nine years bombimg Laos,” Khamvongsa said. “However, the US has provided, on average, only $2.7 million per year for clearance in Laos over the past 15 years.”

The necessary funding, as many of the witnesses pointed out that day, would only be a fraction of what the United States spent on helping to rebuild Europe and Japan after WWII, and those situations involved regimes that had actually declared war on — and attacked — America.

“The problem of UXOs in Laos has been allowed to persist far too long,” Khamvongsa said. “Too many innocent lives have been lost. Too many farmers and children have been left disabled, their lives forever changed. But it is not too late to stop this senseless suffering.”

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