

STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS' SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE  
PACIFIC AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT  
HEARING ON LEGACIES OF WAR: UNEXPLODED ORDNANCES IN LAOS  
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[Check Against Delivery]

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee. It is an honor to appear before you today, along with my colleagues from Legacies of War and the Humpty Dumpty Institute, to discuss the important issue of unexploded ordnance in Laos.

The Mines Advisory Group, better known as MAG, is an international humanitarian organization that saves lives and builds future by destroying weapons in conflict-affected countries. MAG is currently working in 17 countries across the globe, helping communities to escape the poverty and devastation caused by conflict. I serve on the board of MAG's US partner, MAG America.

In 1994, MAG established operations in Laos in cooperation with the Mennonite Central Committee and the Lao National Committee for Social and Veterans Affairs. MAG thus became the first international NGO to begin clearing the country of its extensive UXO contamination. As we've heard from preceding testimony, Laos is one of the most heavily UXO contaminated countries in the world. Figures on the number of bombs that were dropped and failed to detonate in Laos can be disputed, and in fact we do not know how many items of UXO remain littered across the country today. A thorough survey of the whole country has never been completed and much of the land along the eastern border is densely forested. The National

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Regulatory Authority (NRA) in Laos is currently addressing this shortcoming by developing a national contamination database, and a clearer picture of the remaining amount of UXO will be available in the not too distant future.

The point that is indisputable and most important to note, however, is that serious levels of UXO contamination in Laos continue to have an extremely detrimental and damaging impact on the country's people, its economy, and its future. Widespread contamination restricts economic growth by limiting the population's ability to grow cash crops, thereby forcing many individuals and families into subsistence farming. Those efforts at subsistence farming are themselves hampered by the presence of unexploded ordnance.

Since the inception of MAG's program in 1994, our approach has not focused solely on finding and destroying UXO and cluster munitions. Rather, MAG has seen its clearance activities as the first step in relieving the very problems I've just mentioned. Currently MAG operates in Khammouane and Xieng Khoang Provinces, two of the most contaminated provinces in the country, where our goal is to alleviate poverty through safe and effective UXO clearance. MAG achieves this by linking its activities and strategies to the Lao National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy. UXO clearance is one of the three poverty-related programs outlined in this national strategy, and MAG is committed to achieving the clearance targets and priorities set forth in the government's plan. MAG also partners with and clears land in support of development agencies, such as the World Food Program, World Vision and the Lao Red Cross. By linking directly with development projects, MAG contributes to improved food security and provides access to basic services and infrastructure to some of the poorest, most marginalized

communities in Laos. This integrated approach ensures that our grassroots interventions make an impact not only for our beneficiary communities, but also at the regional and national level.

An impact assessment that MAG completed in 2009 has proven that MAG's work results in much more than cleared land. 63% of village groups interviewed in Khammouane and 83% in Xieng Khouang reported increased yield in productivity following clearance conducted by MAG. Some households reported that they could now plow their land more deeply, because they were confident that they would not be injured as a result, again increasing agricultural productivity. As a result of increased crop yield, approximately 3 out of 4 respondents said that their household income had increased.

In addition to eradicating poverty, MAG's work was proven to improve people's sense of security and self respect. By removing a sense of risk and hopelessness associated with UXO contamination, 97% of people interviewed in Khammouane and 94% in Xieng Khouang reported feeling a restored sense of pride and a greater feeling of safety and security for themselves and their family.

MAG's program in Laos currently employs 235 individuals, 229 of which are national staff members. By employing individuals from the local community, MAG builds a sustainable capacity and empowers Laotians to play a key role in their recovery from conflict. We actively recruit women and individuals who have been disabled from UXO accidents, as they are too often the most marginalized members of their community.

MAG has been able to achieve these results thanks to support from its donors, including the US Department of State's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, the UK's Department of International Development, the European Union, Ausaid and World Vision. Ongoing support from the State Department has resulting in the destruction of over 30,000 items of UXO, and Over 2,000,000 square meters of land <sup>were</sup> cleared for agricultural land, infrastructure development, access to water, and schools in 2008-2009 in a project funded by USDA and the Humpty Dumpty Institute.

Unfortunately, the investment (or, perhaps put more aptly, the disinvestment) made in contaminating Laos has far outweighed the investment made in cleaning it up. The UXO clearance assets currently deployed by MAG and other operators are not adequate to tackle the extensive challenge presented by such widespread contamination. With limited resources, MAG focuses on the poorest, most threatened communities and clearing enough land to enable them to grow crops and have a sustainable food source year round. Additional support would enable MAG and other organizations to scale-up their operations to address these urgent cases more quickly, and then tackle other unmet demands such as clearance of land for larger scale farming, commerce, and trade, thereby increasing the multiplier effect of clearance on poverty eradication.

In closing, I would like to thank the US Government, in particular the Department of State's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, for its ongoing support to MAG's Laos program. I would also like to urge the US government to provide additional funding for UXO clearance in Laos. Without increased support, the men, women, and children of Lao will continue to be killed, injured, and impoverished by the legacy of our secret war.