LAOS: CONVERTING BOMBED FIELDS INTO TILLING FIELDS

VIDEO

LAO TRAINEES WITH U.S. ARMY PERSONNEL (27")

AMERICAN TRAINER

AUDIO

NARRATION

An unprecedented partnership is unfolding in this training centre near Vientiane, the Lao capital.

"...look around here. Look at it."

U.S. military personnel instruct Lao civilians to deal with unexploded ordnance or UXO and landmines left over from the Indochina War.

NARRATION

From 1964 to 1973, more than two million tons of bombs were dropped by American forces in Laos. Concentrating on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, it was the equivalent of a plane load every eight minutes round the clock for nine years. As much as thirty per cent of the bombs failed to explode, leaving half of the country contaminated.
NARRATION
Here in Xieng Khouang province every monument was destroyed, every building flattened. These damaged landmarks are a grim reminder of the bombing. Today villagers continue to live with the problem.

JAN MATTSSON, UN RESIDENT COORDINATOR
"The war ended 20 years ago, but for thousands of villagers in Laos, it’s not over yet and it’s one of the major causes behind poverty in this country. People are affected directly through the loss of life and limb and indirectly through the denial of land for food production. To me it’s the ultimate tragedy that people go hungry not because they don’t want to work and not because there’s not fertile land near their village but because the risk of using that land is too great."

NARRATION
Unlike in countries where landmines are the principal problem, the walking wounded are seldom seen on the streets. For the bombs and bomblets scattered across Laos kill instantly. More than 40 per cent of casualties are children.
While international attention has focused on the menace of landmines - other explosive ordnance - such as the UXO in Laos - have been largely ignored.

Now, at the initiative of the UN Development Programme, and in partnership with UNICEF and the Government, a nation-wide effort called the UXO LAO programme has been launched to deal with UXO clearance.

Clearing bombed fields so villagers can farm again is now top priority for this nation by the Mekong River.

"Unless this issue of unexploded ordnance was addressed, development programmes in general would be less than totally effective because ordnance are so extensively spread over Laos that it affects almost anything that anyone does."

The first graduates are assigned to MAG, or Mines Advisory Group, so far the only agency involved in operational work. Since 1994
MAG has removed 13,000 pieces of ordnance. Removing randomly scattered UXO is far more hazardous than clearing methodically laid minefields.

**BEN LARK, DIRECTOR, MAG**

"We make our own boundaries, whereas for the minefield the boundaries are more or less set for you. Also we are dealing with an enormous variety of ordnance, maybe fifty or sixty different types of ordnance, maybe even more. They are 20 to 25 years old so they are corroded. They're not only under the ground but on top of the ground."

**NARRATION**

This area in Xieng Khouang has already been mapped for clearance by MAG. Ben Lark and demolition expert, Paul Stanford, are back in the district to consult with the village representative.

**STANFORD:**

"What we will do is we'll work our way from one end of the village all the way through to clear the lot."
This house is sitting on top of unexploded bombs. The area is heavily populated, with children roaming about. However, people have returned to farming in spite of severe UXO contamination.

Even the main road leading to Vietnam has to be cleared of ordnance.

"...Particularly nasty piece of bomblet with a fragmentation effect probably about 200 metres radius from this point to the house."

Saysamone, aged 20, is one of four women trained by MAG. She personally knew farmers who've been killed.

"Civilians are injured when they hit bomblets with their hoes or when they practice slash and burn agriculture."
Extreme precautions are taken when exploding UXO in high population areas. A large site has to be cleared to make sure people are not hurt by flying bits of shrapnel. To Saysamone detonating UXO is all in a day's work.

The cost of clearing bombs is very high. Over a ten-year period UNDP estimates $8 million dollars a year is needed to enable the UXO LAO programme to reduce casualties and free land for food production.

"We welcome any kind of contribution, that is our wish. Our proposal is to clear the UXO from Lao territory as soon as possible and any kind of contribution is very, very important for us."
 Aside from the U.S., Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the UK have contributed. To cut costs it is vital that Lao capacity to manage the programme be built up.

CAPT. RON JOHNSON, TEAM LEADER, TRAINING CENTRE

"Right now we’re teaching technicians but our real mission is to establish a self-sustaining UXO Lao programme and that’s really why we’re here."

Trainees sing "We hate UXO. UXO are dangerous..." It’s hoped that villagers will incorporate the danger of bombs into their folksong and folklore.

For the country as a whole, the effects of a forgotten war are, at least, out in the open and the healing process can begin. But the legacy of the bombing remains. It will take money, commitment and courage to remove the terrible menace of unexploded ordnance from the daily lives of the Lao people.
This report was prepared by Danila Mendoza for the United Nations.