


Decades after war, millions of unexploded U.S. bombs haunt Laos



A Laotian technician prods the ground in search of explosive devices left undetonated from the Vietnam conflict. Denis Gray/AP file

Global treaty pushes U.S. and others to ban cluster bombs

By Bobby Caina Calvan  2:00 am, September 23, 2011 Updated: 8:20 pm, January 23, 2012

PHONSAVAN, Laos—Liangkham Laphommavong has one of the world's most dangerous jobs.

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Her 9-year-old son knows this and protested when, at the start of a recent morning, Laphommavong set off to join a crew of 17 other women who routinely put their lives at risk.

Throughout Laos, people like Laphommavong tramp into bucolic rice paddies, woods and rolling hills—landscapes that belie the hazards of their jobs. Laphommavong is a bomb sweeper, covering terrain, inch by perilous inch, in search of unexploded ordnance.

There are an estimated 80 million **unexploded bombs** scattered around Laos—still-lethal remnants of a secret war against communists waged by U.S. forces four decades ago.

In one suspect field, Laphommavong was armed only with her nerves and a hand-held bomb detector. Her face was expressionless and tense as she fixed her gaze on the ground. In black boots, she stepped deliberately through a fallow rice field; her detector beeped steadily as it glided over patches of barren earth and clumps of grass.

In the year that she's worked as a sweeper, Laphommavong's detector has passed over numerous suspicious objects. When the tool's beeps quicken,

International Center for Journalists

Journalist Bobby Caina Calvan traveled to Southeast Asia as part of a project sponsored by the **International Center for Journalists**, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that promotes coverage of global issues. Funding for this story was provided by the Ford Foundation.

so does the beat of her heart, signaling it's time to get on her knees and, with a small trowel, dig carefully for what lurks beneath.

"I am afraid all the time," the 32-year-old single mother said, through an interpreter. "We are careful every time we take a step. We always think there could be a bomb."

By most accounts, Laos is the most bombed country per capita in history. U.S. warplanes dropped **270 million explosives** on Laos during more than a half-million missions during the Vietnam War. U.S. officials say more bombs were dropped on Laos than were unleashed on Japan and Germany, combined, during World War II. Most of the bombs were cluster munitions designed to spread damage by scattering arsenals of smaller bomblets.

Nearly a third of those bombs never exploded.

Last week, delegates from dozens of countries convened in Beirut, Lebanon, to push other nations, including the United States, to join a year-old international treaty that would eradicate the global stockpile of cluster munitions.

More than 100 countries have **joined the treaty**, but some of the world's largest cluster bomb producers—including the United States, China and Russia—have declined to sign on.

The symbolism was inescapable last year when the Convention on Cluster Munitions chose Laos to host the first meeting of the treaty's signatories and issue a self-described "political declaration" seeking an end to cluster bombs.

Laos pays a price

Each year, 300 Laotians die or are injured because of U.S. bombs. The explosives remain a particular menace to farmers who risk death or serious injury when they plow into what could be minefields.

Government officials refer to unexploded ordnance as UXOs. Across Laos, villagers and school children know them simply as "bombies."

Dormant bombs lie in wait under fallen forest leaves, lodged among river rocks, nestled in weeds or strewn across pastures. They are scattered along roads, in streams, near schools and within villages.

About half the casualties from UXOs are children who mistake dart-shaped bombs or baseball-sized ordnance for toys.

In May, three children, between 9 and 11 years old, died when they came across a bomb while foraging for bamboo in Savannakhet Province, an area hard hit during the war because of its proximity to Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Seven years ago in another heavily bombed area, a UXO killed four boys who were walking home from school. Among the victims was Pheng Souvanthone's 11-year-old brother.

Today Souvanthone leads the all-woman crew assembled by the U.K.-based humanitarian group MAG—Mines Advisory Group—one of a handful of outside organizations helping the Lao government clear UXOs.

During a break from a sweep of a rice field, Souvanthone talked about the accident that killed her brother. It was so long ago, but she said that even when she's working with her crew to clear bombs, memories of him sit in the back of her mind.



A bomb-detector sweeps through a rice field in Laos. Throughout the country, an estimated 80 million unexploded bombs are dormant threats lingering from the U.S. bombing campaign four decades ago that targeted communist fighters and supply lines. Bobby Caina Calvin



Bomb recovery team members Pheng Souvanthone (left) and Liangkham Laphommavong take a break from their work sweeping for bombs in the Laotian countryside. Bobby Caina Calvin



Rusted UXOs—unexploded ordnance dropped on Laos during the Vietnam war—under lock and key. Children learn to call them "bombies." The explosives claim hundreds of lives each year, many of them children who mistake the UXOs for toys. Bobby Caina Calvin

As Souvanthone's team worked, villagers nearby went about their usual tasks. One woman paid little heed to the sweepers, uniformed in green coveralls and floppy wide-brimmed hats. A young man walked casually through the fields as he returned home from nearby woods, gathering vegetables.

Bombies strike unexpectedly

Children learn about the bombies at an early age, some through tragedy and others in the classroom. In school they are taught to recognize bombs and be mindful of their surroundings, where they step and where they play. Should they run across a bombie, they are instructed to keep their distance.

In another village, Ladoune—he goes only by his family name—recalled his own experiences with UXOs. He knew there were lots of bombs outside his village. He smiled briefly as he remembered his childhood, roaming the woods and fields near his village. He once came across a bombie and stepped away, like he was taught in school.

The lesson, though, didn't protect him as an adult. One day last fall, a bomb exploded in his face as he stoked a backyard fire. How could he know, he said, that a UXO lay buried just feet from his family's home?

Ladoune lost an eye and a finger.

Ladoune is in his early 20s. His vision is mostly destroyed and his future is uncertain. He wonders how he will care for his wife and two young children.

There were assurances of help from the government and aid agencies but none materialized, he said. He's still waiting for a promised glass eye.

"Who do I blame? What's the use?" he asked.

For years, U.S. officials had denied that its warplanes ever crossed into Laos during the Vietnam War.

"There was never a clear declaration that the war took place, let alone that there was this extensive bombing," said Channapha Khamvongsa, executive director of the Washington-based group Legacies of War. "The extent of the bombing was so vast," she said.

Today, though, on its online backgrounder on Laos, the U.S. State Department sums it up this way: "For nearly a decade, Laos was subjected to extremely heavy bombing as the U.S. sought to interdict the portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that passed through eastern Laos. Unexploded ordnance, particularly cluster munitions, remains a major problem."

In 1996, the U.S. Air Force released **records** of its bombing missions in Laos, from 1964 to 1973, allowing the Laotian government and aid groups to pinpoint searches for unexploded bombs.

Pressure to do more

Since 1994, recovery teams have found about a million bombs, after sweeping through less than 90 square miles in a country roughly the size of Minnesota. About three-quarters of Laos may yet have UXOs.

The Lao government has refrained from publicly criticizing the United States, deferring to the international community—and critics within the United States—to pressure Washington to do more.

In a letter to the State Department, six former U.S. ambassadors and delegates to Laos joined Legacies of War this summer to urge Congress to commit \$100 million over the next 10 years for the bomb-eradication program. They tried unsuccessfully to get

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to visit Laos and address the UXO issue during her recent swing through Southeast Asia.

Despite international pressure, U.S. officials also didn't make a trip last November to Vientiane, Laos' capital city, where delegates from dozens of countries rolled out the cluster bomb treaty.

Just prior to the historic meeting in Vientiane, the U.S. government issued a statement saying it was "committed to reducing the impact of explosive remnants of war on civilians worldwide."

The U.S. government said that since 1993 it has spent more than \$51 million on UXOs and landmines in Laos, with \$16 million given within the past three years. It also noted that the U.S. Department of Defense has trained and equipped bomb clearance teams.

The United States contributes about half of the financial aid coming from the international community, but is under pressure to spend more on an effort that is far from complete.

For years, Laos insisted it could deal with UXOs alone, dismissing international offers of aid. Later, however, officials conceded they needed help.

Deadly dots on a map

At the Lao government's UXO office in Xieng Khouang Province, a huge map is blotted in red, each red dot signifying a bomb drop on Laos. In some spots the ink bleeds from a heavy concentration of dots.

One of those places is Xieng Khouang Province.

The World Heritage Site known as the Plain of Jars is located here and bears scars of U.S. air strikes. Many of its famous huge, ancient stone containers sustained heavy damage.

Recovery teams have swept most of the site for unexploded ordnance, but signs still warn visitors to remain only in areas designated bomb-free.

Around Phonsavan, the province's largest city, huge salvaged casings of American bombs are featured attractions along the busy main street. A line of missiles, some of them towering more than six feet, serves as fencing in front of homes.

This city is home to a UXO information center, where tourists, including U.S. military veterans, learn about the human toll caused by the U.S. bombing.

Kingphet Phimmavong, provincial coordinator for the government's bomb clearance operations in Xieng Khouang, could only laugh when asked how long it will take to rid his country of the unwanted bombs.

"It depends on us getting more funds to get more people to work looking for bombs," he said, "so it goes faster."