Laos Struggles With Deadly Legacy of Vietnam War

Roughly 30 years after the end of the Vietnam War, small, isolated Laos struggles with its deadly legacy. From the 1960s, Laos was embroiled in the war in neighboring Vietnam and as a result, it became one of the most heavily bombed countries in the world. Correspondent Scott Bobb visited central Laos and reports on efforts to clear millions of unexploded bombs and land mines.

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Sakhou is a village of several hundred people in Savannakhet province of central Laos, several dozen kilometers from the nearest paved road. Residents live in wooden houses built on stilts and survive by cultivating rice and small vegetable gardens.

One resident, Agnou Luang, has spent most of his 54 years sitting on a small wooden box with the stumps of what once were his legs sticking out from his shorts.

"I was chasing down a buffalo in the field, when a land mine exploded in my face," he said.

Mr. Luang, then 21, lost both legs and his eyesight.

The accident occurred in 1973, two years before the North Vietnamese won the war. But even now, as ceremonies are being held in Vietnam to mark the 30th anniversary of the end of the war, its bombs and land mines continue to kill and maim.

A few paces from Mr. Luang's house, a village elder presents three boys, each about 10 years old. Their chests and faces are pocked with shell fragments. Two of them are missing eyes.

The elder explains that the boys were building a fire in December when an artillery shell buried underneath exploded. A fourth boy was killed.

Sakhou lies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a 50-kilometer-wide swath of roads and footpaths that were used by the North Vietnamese during the war to infiltrate rival South Vietnam. As a result, the region was heavily bombed by U.S., South Vietnamese and Lao warplanes.

In all, more than two million tons of bombs, land mines, artillery shells and mortars were spread in Laos. Experts say nearly one-third did not detonate. This unexploded ordnance (known as UXO) has killed 6000 people since the war ended. And it killed nearly 100 people last year alone.

The ordnance is an obstacle to economic growth in Laos because land must be cleared in a time-consuming process before it can be used.

In a sand quarry several dozen kilometers down the road, workers have discovered a 500 kilogram bomb and are clearing the area. The detonation team straps packets of explosives onto the bomb and runs electrical wiring to a portable detonator.

Because of the bomb's size, the team must move nearly two kilometers away to safely detonate it.

The Lao government, with foreign aid, including several million dollars a year from the U.S. government, has disposed of more than 127,000 pieces of UXO in the past 10 years.

The head of the operation in Savannakhet Province, Bounyeam Vilayvong, says large bombs can be destructive, but the small anti-personnel bombs, called bombies, are the most deadly.

"There are a lot of bombs, but the biggest problem is the bombies," he said. "They hurt a lot of people."

The bombies, which were scattered by the tens of thousands, can be picked up by a child, or kicked by a passerby. They are designed to explode and scatter dozens of bullet rounds that can maim or kill.

Another part of the UXO effort is to clear land so that it can be farmed. Teams mark off a hectare of land, then systematically pass metal detectors over it, one meter at a time. It is slow and dangerous work.

But in the past 10 years, more than 5000 hectares have been cleared. Experts say to reduce the human toll, it is equally important to educate people about the dangers of handling UXO.

The government stages community awareness programs that include puppet shows, games and songs. The program is meant to be fun, but the message is deadly serious.

Awareness teams in the past 10 years have presented programs to more than one million people in nearly 5000 villages across Laos. Despite the effort, the toll continues to rise. One problem: bombs fetch a good price from scrap metal dealers, as a result villagers scavenge them.

Laos was slower than some its neighbors to start ordnance removal, in part because of the government's self-imposed isolation and partly because of delays in getting funding.

An agriculture expert with the EcoLao consultant group, Gary Oughton, is angry that the problem has been allowed to fester for so long.

"It's rather scandalous that so much land has been kept out of production because of the risk, and so many innocent lives have been lost and children and people maimed, because of the slow pace of the mine clearing and bombie clearing operations," he noted.

The Lao government, with the help of international funding and experts, is training more Lao workers and hopes to accelerate the removal programs. But millions of hectares of land are still infested with live ordnance. And as a result, experts say, it will take decades to free the country from its deadly legacy.


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