Interactions with a Violent Past

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CHAPTER 4

Laos — Living with Unexploded Ordnance: Past Memories and Present Realities

Elaine Russell

The Long Shadow of War

The 1959–73 civil war in Laos, which became part of the wider Second Indochina War, killed, injured and displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians. The US military conducted massive bombing campaigns during the last nine years of the conflict, dropping over 2.1 million tons of ordnance (US Senate Congressional Record 1975: 14,266). This left Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history. Today the shadow of war continues to intrude into the daily lives of the Lao people in former war zones and imposes a heavy burden on the entire country. Remnants of war — the visible scars ofbombing on the landscape and remaining buildings along with massive contamination from unexploded ordnance (UXO) — provide constant reminders of the past while continuing to threaten the physical, psychological and economic well-being of the people (see Khamvongsa and Russell 2009; Prokosch 1995; Tyner 2010; Henig 2012). Many older Lao have vivid memories of horrific events, hardships and the loss of loved ones during the war. After US bombing in northeastern and southeastern Laos intensified significantly in 1968, civilian survivors began arriving to refugee camps in Vientiane. Soon journalists reported the refugees’ experiences. Additional stories have been documented over the years by writers and filmmakers. While some accounts are difficult to verify, the overwhelming preponderance of evidence reveals a common thread of truth. All the survivors tell of terrible suffering
Laos — Living with Unexploded Ordnance

Younger generations of Lao may not remember the war, but it still shapes the course of their lives today. In a country where 70 percent of the population relies primarily on subsistence farming, with some households supplementing their income through trade, commercial crops and other economic activities, it is estimated that half of the arable land and one-third of the total country is contaminated with UXO. The National Survey of UXO Victims and Accidents Phase 1, published by the National Regulatory Agency for UXO/Mine Action in the Lao PDR (hereafter: NRA) in 2009, reported that at least 30,000 civilians have been killed and 20,000 injured by UXO accidents since the bombing began in 1964; 20,000 of these casualties occurred after the bombing ended in 1973 — a continuation of the original violent intentionality (Gell 1998: 17) in times of peace. Remnants of war challenge the Lao people’s everyday livelihoods as well as cultural beliefs. People have been forced to adapt to the grim reality of their situation, struggling to go on in very difficult conditions. It is ironic that UXO, which killed or injured an average of 300 people a year from 1990–2008 (NRA 2009; casualties have steadily declined since 2008), also provides many rural villagers with a source of income from work in the UXO clearance sector or through the collection and sale of scrap metal from the war (see also Schwenkel’s contribution, this volume). This chapter will recount the events leading to the mass bombardment of Laos and discuss the violent legacy of the Second Indochina War, namely the ongoing threat by UXO. As a kind of violent, decentralized lieu de mémoire (Nora 1989), it haunts and shapes the everyday lives of the rural population of contemporary Laos.

A Brief History

External Intervention and Civil War in Laos

The First Indochina War (1946–54) entailed a sharp internal division in both the Lao and Vietnamese societies. While parts of the political elites in both countries aligned themselves with French colonial rule, the communist movement under the guidance of Ho Chi Minh took up armed struggle against colonialism. With support from the Việt Minh, Lao communist forces were established in the aftermath of the Second World War. By 1953, Lao and Vietnamese revolutionary troops had control of Phongsaly...
and Houaphan provinces, which border southwest China and northwestern Vietnam respectively. The Việt Minh defeated the French at Điện Biên Phủ, a remote valley in northwestern Vietnam near the Lao border, on 7 May 1954, effectively ending the war and French rule in Southeast Asia.

During 1953–54, world powers met in Geneva, Switzerland, to negotiate a series of agreements to end the First Indochina War. The treaty temporarily divided Vietnam into two parts along the 17th parallel: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north and the State of Vietnam (replaced by the Republic of Vietnam in 1955) in the south. It called for elections to be held to form a new government unifying the north and south, but the south refused to participate. The stalemate led to a growing insurgency and the formation in 1960 of the National Liberation Front (NLF), which carried out guerilla operation in the south. This eventually turned into a full civil war between the north and south, and continued to spill over into Laos where a network of supply routes for the insurgents was established — the so-called “Ho Chi Minh Trail” (see Introduction and Pholsena’s chapter, this volume).

As part of the Geneva Agreements, The Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Laos was signed on 20 July 1954. Laos was declared a sovereign, neutral nation, and foreign forces were required to withdraw from the country with the exception of a small French force to train the Royal Lao Army (Stuart-Fox 1997: 85–7). The North Vietnamese forces never fully withdrew and continued to train Lao communist troops (Conboy 1995: 13). At the same time, American and French military advisors continued to work in the country with the Royal Lao Army. The Geneva Agreement called for the Royal Lao Government to reconcile with the Pathet Lao — the name under which the Lao communist movement was known internationally — by integrating Pathet Lao troops into the Royal Lao Army, reintegrating Phongsaly and Houaphan provinces with the rest of the country and holding elections to establish a new coalition government. However, these goals were undermined as Laos became embroiled in the growing ideological struggle of the global Cold War. Conservative, or Rightist leaders, who opposed the formation of a coalition government with the Pathet Lao, gained support from the American government. At the same time, Communist leaders and some Neutralist (those non-aligned with Rightists or Communists but desiring reconciliation and cooperation between all political groups) were supported by China and North Vietnam. The ongoing interference and manipulation by outside countries led to further political radicalization in the 1960s.
The American government under President Eisenhower’s administration (1953–61) was determined to stop communism from taking hold in Southeast Asia, believing in the Domino Theory, that is, if one country came under the Communist rule, then the surrounding countries would follow in a domino effect. Initially, the greatest concern was over the situation in Laos. The Program Evaluation Office (PEO) was created within the US Embassy in Vientiane in 1955 to funnel money to the Royal Lao Army and Government. From 1955–58, the US government gave $120 million to Laos in an attempt to strengthen the Royal Lao Army and Rightist leaders within the government. About 85 percent of the funds went to the army, while other payments went to government ministers and influential Lao. The flow of US money to support Rightist leaders led to corruption and became a major political issue (Evans 2002: 93–104; Rust 2012).

Despite American efforts to block a coalition government with the Communists, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma reached an agreement with the Pathet Lao in 1957 and formed a provisional coalition government (Stuart-Fox 1997: 96–7). Elections were held in 1958. US efforts to influence voters were unsuccessful as the Pathet Lao gained a strong footing in the newly elected coalition government. The US undermined the success of the coalition by creating a financial crisis. Aid payments were withheld and America insisted on a devaluation of the Lao currency. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was unable to maintain leadership and resigned after only eight months. Another government was formed by Phouy Xananikon, a conservative leader with US backing. He immediately opposed the Communists and did not include any Pathet Lao leaders in his cabinet (ibid.: 102–4). The Royal Lao Army and defense ministry came under the direction of General Phoumi Nosavan, who stepped up repression of Pathet Lao members and eventually arrested several key leaders (Tappe 2010). Meanwhile, the DRV had shifted their political struggle into an armed struggle against South Vietnam and strengthened their efforts to control the Lao-Vietnamese border regions and build up Lao guerillas to facilitate the infiltration of South Vietnam with soldiers and supplies via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Internal strife in Laos escalated after Phoumi Nosavan staged a military coup in December 1959, followed by rigged elections in April 1960 in which Phoumi’s rightist Committee for the Defence of National Interests (CDNI) prevailed.

Captain Kong Le, a Neutralist in the Royal Lao Army who was upset by American interference in Lao politics, led his troops in a counter coup in August 1960 — which provoked another Rightist coup backed by the
US four months later. As a result, Captain Kong Le and some of the Neutralist forces joined the Communist Pathet Lao to fight the Royal Lao Government. The civil war had effectively begun (Evans 2002: 105–17).

World leaders gathered once again in Geneva in May 1961 to negotiate an end to the conflict in Laos. After further meetings, the participants signed the 1962 Geneva Agreement on Laos. Once more, the nation was declared a sovereign neutral country, and foreign military troops and intervention were prohibited. The US hoped that the new agreements would halt the use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and reduce the growing insurgent threat in South Vietnam (Evans 2002: 123–5). But the agreements had little effect on the Lao civil war or the continued use and expansion of the North Vietnamese supply routes as the civil war in Vietnam continued to grow.

**The US “Secret War” in Laos**

While the US had supplied military funding, arms and training to the Royal Lao Army since the mid-1950s, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) greatly expanded covert and illegal operations in Laos beginning in 1960. The US wanted to stop Pathet Lao insurgents (assisted by the North Vietnamese Army) in their fight to unseat the Royal Lao Government and establish a communist Lao state and stem the flow of North Vietnamese arms and support to the communist insurgents in South Vietnam (ibid.: 130–40). Both covert US operations and North Vietnamese military activities in Laos were in direct violation of the 1962 Geneva Agreements. From 1960–70, three separate US presidential administrations (Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon) kept the US role in Laos a secret from the US Congress and American people. Later, these covert operations became known as the US “secret war” in Laos.

The American military and CIA advisors felt the Royal Lao Army was ill-suited to fight a guerilla war against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army in the rugged mountains of north and southeastern Laos. Instead, the CIA recruited, trained and armed a surrogate counterinsurgency force from ethnic hill groups. The mostly Hmong, Mien and Khmu forces were led by Vang Pao, a Hmong officer in the Royal Lao Army. Vang Pao and a group of Hmong fighters had fought with the French against the Việt Minh in the First Indochina War.

The CIA built a secret airstrip at Long Chieng, a remote, narrow valley midway between Vientiane and the Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang Province. The airstrip served as the operating base for the Special Forces. In addition, a series of dirt airstrips were established on mountaintops
around the Pathet Lao-held areas where single engine aircraft could deliver Special Forces and supplies. The CIA reregistered US military and commercial planes with two civilian airlines. The stated purpose was to fly humanitarian missions to deliver food and medicine to Lao villagers caught in the warzone. In truth, the airlines were owned by the CIA and most of the pilots were US military personnel who were reclassified as civilians (Conboy 1995: 63–4). The planes were used to deliver troops and arms.

The communist Lao movement, headquartered in Houaphan Province (see Tappe’s chapter), was assisted by the North Vietnamese Army. They controlled several regions of eastern Laos, although boundaries were not straightforward and shifted as the war progressed. The Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang Province, bordering Houaphan Province, became a major battleground throughout the war. For years, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army fought the US-funded Special Forces and sometimes the Royal Lao Army for control of this region.

In June 1964, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces shot down a US reconnaissance plane and a short while later a fighter jet over northern Laos (Haney 1972: 268). The US used these incidents to argue their case for bombing Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese positions in northern Laos. The Lao prime minister gave his approval. The bombing was extended in December 1964 to a second campaign, which became the larger of the two, aimed at leveling out the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southeastern Laos (Van Staaveren 1993). The bombing campaigns continued throughout the rest of the war.

**The Scale of the Bombings**

US military records reveal that America dropped over 2.1 million tons of ordnance in 580,000 bombing missions on Laos from 1964–73. This is more ordnance than the US dropped during all of the Second World War in Europe and the Pacific. It was the equivalent of a planeload of bombs dropped every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, for nine years.

For the first time, the US used large numbers of cluster bombs. Cluster bomb casings were dropped from planes and opened mid-air to release anywhere from 100–700 small bomblets the size of a soup can or orange. More than 270 million bomblets, including 19 different designs, were dropped on Laos (Hizney 2006: 15–25; see as well Parsch 2012 and Prokosch 1995: 81–125). It is estimated that 30 percent, or close to 80 million bomblets, did not detonate (Khamvongsa and Russell 2009: 293). Cluster bomblets are similar to landmines, only they have more deadly
Map 4.1  US Military Strike Data (Source: Lao PDR National Regulatory Authority).
consequences. Some sprayed shrapnel up to 150 yards, while others spread ball bearings or nails.

The heaviest bombing took place in the southeast along the Ho Chi Minh Trail where about 1,720,000 tons of ordnance was dropped. US military records indicate 380,000 tons of ordnance was dropped on northern Laos, primarily in Xieng Khouang and Houaphan provinces (US Senate Congressional Record 1975: 14266). The bombings targeted not only military troops and facilities, but also civilian villages, fields and livestock. After President Johnson (1963–1969) ordered a halt to bombing missions over North Vietnam in 1968, the bombing campaigns over northern and southeastern Laos escalated dramatically. In 1967, close to 128,000 tons of ordnance was dropped on Laos. The following year, this amount almost doubled then increased nearly fourfold in 1969 to 515,000 tons. The bombings in 1970 and 1971 continued at the dramatic rates of 453,000 tons and 437,500 tons, respectively (ibid.). The bombs fell day and night. The town of Xieng Khouang, former capital of Xieng Khouang Province, was completely leveled in 1969.

Plate 4.1 Cluster bomb casing and bomblets.
My village stood on the edge of the road from Xieng Khouang to the Plain of Jars. There were rice fields next to the road. The first time the airplanes bombed the road but didn’t bomb my village. At that time my life was filled with pleasure and happiness. With great happiness because the mountains and forests were beautiful through nature: land, water and climate suitable for rice farmers. And there were many homes together in our one village. But that dream did not last long. Because the airplanes came bombing my rice field until the bomb craters made farming impossible. And the village was hit and burned. And some relatives who were working in their fields without shelter came running out to the road to return to the village, but the airplanes saw and shot them — killing the farmers in a heart-rending manner. We heard their screams, but we couldn’t go to help them. When the airplanes left we went to look but they had already died.

— 1970 account of a civilian bombing survivor from Xieng Khouang in Branfman 2010 [1972].

*The Secret War Revealed*

After the bombing campaigns intensified, large numbers of civilian survivors started arriving to refugee camps located near Vientiane. Their stories
began to reach the outside world over the next few years. Up until this time, the US had denied bombing northern Laos, and the inaccessibility of war zones had made it impossible for journalists to verify. Although the Nixon administration (1969–74) finally admitted to the bombings in 1970, it denied that civilians had been targeted. Survivors refuted this claim.

Two young American men, Fred Branfman and Walter Haney, who were teaching English in Laos at the time, collected the refugees’ stories and presented the information in testimony before the US Congress. Fred Branfman (2010 [1972]) published survivors’ drawings and accounts of the bombings in his book, *Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life under an Air War*. Walt Haney (1972) wrote a chapter about the US secret war in Laos, which was published in the Gravel Edition of the *Pentagon Papers*.

The following quote is from a report written by George Chapelier (quoted in Haney 1972: 276), a United Nations advisor in Laos, after interviewing dozens of refugees from the Plain of Jars in 1970:

> By 1968, the intensity of the bombings was such that no organized life was possible in the villages. The villagers moved to the outskirts and then deeper and deeper into the forest as the bombing reached its peak in 1969, when jet planes came daily and destroyed all stationary structures; nothing was left standing. The villagers lived in trenches and holes or in caves, and they only farmed at night. All informants, without exception, had his village completely destroyed. In the last phase, bombings were aimed at the systematic destruction of the material basis of the civilian society.

**The End of War**

The US government signed the Paris Agreement with the North Vietnamese in January 1973, agreeing to cease military operations and withdraw from Indochina. The Royal Lao Government and Pathet Lao followed by signing a ceasefire, the Vientiane Agreement, in February 1973. However, the protocol implementing the ceasefire was not completed until September of that year (Evans 2002: 166–9). The two sides formed a new coalition government.

By December 1975, the Communists had taken control of the country and government, establishing the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Families were torn apart as some members decided to flee the country while others remained behind. Approximately 300,000 people, close to ten percent of the population, left Laos over the next few years (ibid.). Many ended up in refugee camps in Thailand and eventually resettled in other countries, primarily France, the US, and Australia.
The Lao who returned to their villages in the former war zones found their houses destroyed and their fields, which had once yielded rice and vegetables, filled with UXO — everything from large bombs and cluster bomblets to mortars, landmines, rockets and hand grenades. Over 186 types of ordnance from the war have been found. People soon discovered that danger lurked everywhere — buried in the dirt under houses, in schoolyards, rice paddies, orchards and stream beds, even nestled in the branches of trees. Cluster bomblets and other ordnance lay in wait for a farmer throwing a hoe into his field or staking his water buffalo to the ground, a teenager cutting down bamboo or a child picking up a small metal object that looked like a toy.

Today people still remember how many were killed right after the war, before they understood the danger from UXO buried in the land. In the village of Ban Nong Boua, located near the former Ho Chi Minh Trail, Mr Kee, the village headman, described the situation in an interview with Sean Sutton of the not-for-profit humanitarian demining organization Mines Advisory Group (MAG 2011b):

So many people were killed in the bombing during the war. The villagers could not stay. They lived in caves and in the forest. Every house in the village was destroyed — everything was gone. After the war we tried to start again and many were killed farming because of the UXO. When we farmed we would fill buckets up with bombs and bury them in the bomb craters. We thought it was scrap — we didn’t know they were dangerous. Then people started to die. That’s how we found out. We found out the hard way. I found a bombie5 and threw it into a crater but it blew up in the air. I was lucky because I was behind a termite’s nest so I wasn’t hurt.

Legacies of War — Almost 40 Years Later

The legacies of war continue to haunt the nearly 6.6 million people living in Laos today. Unexploded cluster bomblets and other ordnance have been found in all 17 provinces of the country and in one-quarter of over 10,500 villages (Handicap International 1997). For many in Laos, the war lives on.

The Human Toll

The NRA survey on UXO victims, published in 2009, covered 95 percent of the villages in Laos and documented at least 30,000 deaths and 20,000 injuries to civilians from UXO accidents (1964–2008). Close to 20,000 of these casualties, including 8,000 deaths, occurred from 1974–2008, or
after the war had ended and the bombing stopped in late 1973. Cluster bomblets caused 13.2 percent of UXO accidents from 1964–2007, but this increased to 29 percent during the period 1999–2008 (NRA 2009).

The first six years following the end of war brought 1,500 casualties annually as families returned to their land unaware of the overwhelming presence of UXO. Casualties slowly declined over time as people became more cautious in handling the ordnance and remained at about 300 per year from 1990–2008. From 2008–October 2012, another 683 UXO casualties were reported. Significantly, the number of casualties has fallen steadily from 298 in 2008 to 117 in 2009 and 2010, 99 in 2011 and 44 through October 2012. Children and teenagers, primarily boys, are particularly at risk, making up 43.5 percent of casualties from 2008–2012 (NRA 2009, 2011a/b, 2012; Government of Lao PDR 2012a; IRIN 2011). Eastern Savannakhet Province, primarily the districts of Vilabuly, Phine, Sepon, and Nong, which were traversed by the Ho Chi Minh Trail, experienced the highest number of casualties in the country with 25 percent of the total. Xieng Khouang Province, the focus of the northern bombing campaign, had the second highest number with 12 percent of total casualties (NRA 2010a).

The Lao PDR government is putting a UXO/Mine Accident and Victim Reporting System in place to keep an accurate record of accidents and casualties as well as a Survivor Tracking System that will track data on the needs of UXO survivors (Government of Lao PDR 2012b: 2). However, these systems have been slow to become operational and provide data to the public. But statistics can be numbing, only numbers and percentages. They do not begin to describe the ways in which the presence of UXO has permanently changed people’s lives. Hundreds of children have been orphaned. Families have been left without a father or mother to work in the rice fields, care for the children or run the household. Helpless parents mourn the loss of their children.

Of the 20,000 UXO accident survivors (1964–2008), the majority were left seriously disabled and 13,835 lost anywhere from one to four limbs (NRA 2009: 46). Many survivors have been blinded. These injuries dramatically changed the victims’ lives. Aea Lee, a farmer from Xieng Khouang Province, struck a cluster bomblet while working in his field in November 2008. He lost the lower half of both his legs. Now, he and his family must adjust to a new reality as he may no longer be able to farm his rice fields.10

People with disabilities can face discrimination and isolation in the Lao culture because of the way Buddhist or animist beliefs are sometimes interpreted. In some cases, disability may be viewed as being caused by
bad karma or the presence of evil spirits. While families support and care for disabled relatives, other villagers may avoid them. Disabled children sometimes are not allowed to continue in school, and adults may find it difficult to find someone to marry.\textsuperscript{11}

In August 2008, Legacies of War\textsuperscript{12} members visited the Lao Disabled Women’s Development Association. My colleagues and I met Bouma who was learning to spin thread and weave fabric on a wooden loom. Near the end of the war when she was ten years old, she helped clear a road. A US jet dropped a bomb as the group worked. Her foot was hit and badly damaged, making it difficult for her to walk. She said her family had cared for her, but she felt isolated in her village. She began to cry as she told us no one would ever marry her. She would never have a family.

Attitudes are slowly improving with the help of organizations that provide services to the disabled and educate the public, such as the Lao Disabled People’s Association, Handicap International, the Lao Disabled Women’s Development Association, World Education/Consortium and the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE).

The consequences of UXO contamination cause profound impacts on society. When a parent dies or is disabled, children often drop out of school to help support the family. If a husband is killed or disabled, women must assume the role as head of the household and work to support the family. The presence of UXO has led women into non-traditional jobs, such as demining work. MAG first hired women to work on their clearance teams in 1997 and formed the first all-female team in 2007 (Mines Advisory Group 2011b). The Lao PDR government demining program, UXO Lao, followed suit in 2008. John Dingley, the United Nation’s (UN) senior technical adviser to UXO Lao, pointed out, “These are good jobs, and we want to create as many opportunities as possible for women in post-conflict settings” (IRIN 2011).

\textit{Economic Impacts}

Beyond the terrible human costs, the presence of UXO has severely hindered efforts to bring Laos out of poverty and meet the United Nations Development Program’s (UNDP) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the Least Developed Countries of the world. Although Laos has experienced healthy economic growth over the past ten years and made progress in other measures of development, it ranked 138 out of 187 countries on the UNDP human development index in 2011 (UNDP 2011). The Lao PDR government struggles to provide people with basic needs, including
food security, healthcare, education and infrastructure — a safe water supply, sanitation, roads and electricity. The following sections briefly discuss areas of the economy affected by UXO.

**Agriculture**

In 2007, the World Bank identified 9.2 percent of total land area in Laos as arable land, that is, land suitable for intensive agriculture with seasonal and permanent crops and permanent pasture. It is estimated that half of this land is contaminated with UXO. It becomes more and more difficult for farmers to find enough land to grow an adequate amount of food given population growth, expansion of commercial and plantation crops for export, urbanization, government relocations of villages to accommodate projects such as hydroelectric dams and other competing land uses. In many places, farmers must risk planting crops in contaminated fields in order to feed their families.

**Poverty**

In 2008, 34.7 percent of the people in Laos lived below the national poverty line (Messerli et al. 2008: 132). Food security for subsistence farmers
in many rural areas is a constant challenge. A 2007 UN World Food Program (WFP 2011) study on food security found 50 percent of children under the age of five in rural Laos to be malnourished. Poverty is caused by many factors, including the inaccessibility of remote mountainous regions, low productivity levels of agricultural land and a lack of public services. The presence of UXO only exacerbates the problems. UXO has been found in 41 of the 46 poorest districts.

**Healthcare**

Healthcare facilities in Laos are woefully inadequate for the needs of the Lao population. UXO casualties further strain an already overburdened system. Victims often must travel anywhere from half an hour to several hours to reach one of the 800 Health Centers or to a larger district hospital, none of which are equipped to handle the severity of traumatic UXO injuries. It can take an additional four hours or longer to reach one of the nine regional hospitals with better facilities. Many victims die or lose limbs because treatment is delayed or inadequate (see Table 4.1).

<table>
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<th>Percentage of population</th>
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<td>83.8</td>
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*Source: Messerli et al. 2008: 70.*

On 4 November 2010, Legacies of War members visited a village in eastern Savannakhet Province. I spoke with the parents of a ten-year-old boy who had died two weeks earlier. The boy had found a cluster bomblet in the forest and not knowing what it was, threw it to the ground. He sustained severe head injuries from flying shrapnel while two other boys were slightly injured. The parents managed to find a ride to the clinic in Sepon a little over an hour away. The staff at the clinic said they were unable to help the young boy given the nature of his injuries. The hospital in the city of Savannakhet, with more skilled staff and better equipment, was a five-hour drive away. The parents took the boy home where he died that night.
Healthcare costs, including the cost of transportation to reach healthcare facilities, are borne primarily by patients. Foreign donors provide contributions for specific healthcare programs in some districts, while the Lao PDR government spends only 1.5 to two percent of the government budget on healthcare. In 2007, only 3.8 percent of the Lao population was covered by some form of public or private health insurance. Families of UXO victims often do not have enough money to cover the cost of healthcare. Many must spend what little cash they have available and often are forced to sell livestock and other assets and/or borrow money. A 2004 survey of 289 child UXO survivors found that only 27 percent of families were able to cover healthcare costs, 47 percent used their own money supplemented by selling assets or borrowing money and 26 percent relied solely on selling assets or borrowing money (Bertrand 2004: 29). In some situations, a lack of cash means survivors do not receive any treatment at all.

The Health Equity Fund is a pilot project that began in 2004 to provide funding for the poor. By 2009, the program had expanded to 31 districts and provided healthcare funding to 128,227 people. Funding for the program comes from the government and foreign donors and is administered largely by the Swiss Red Cross. There are plans to expand the program throughout Laos to ultimately cover close to two million individuals. The needs for physical and psychosocial rehabilitation, economic rehabilitation and vocation training for UXO victims far outstrip available services. These services are provided primarily by not-for-profit organizations.

**Infrastructure**

Many rural areas with UXO contamination lack basic infrastructure. Before these projects can be built, the land must first be cleared of ordnance, which substantially adds to project costs. An analysis of projects funded by the Asia Development Bank and World Bank in Laos found that an additional $20 million was spent for UXO clearance in order to build the projects, which included roads, clinics, school, water pipelines, irrigation structures, power lines and dams. The study also found that UXO clearance costs for a power project to provide 33,000 households in rural northern Laos with electricity increased total costs by five percent (UNDP 2007).

**Coping with a Violent Landscape**

Landscapes in former war zones are filled with remnants of war that evoke painful memories and pose a constant threat to people’s physical and
psychological well-being (see Introduction, this volume). The following short case studies illustrate the many ways a violent landscape intrudes into people’s daily lives, and presents stories of individuals and how they have responded to this reality.

**Scars on the Landscape**

The massive number of large bombs that exploded in Laos during the war left vast areas pockmarked with giant craters, many of which are still evident today. Early on, farmers used these craters to dispose of UXO, while today many uncontaminated craters serve as fishing ponds. Other reminders of the war are found at historic sites such as Tham Piu cave (discussed below), a preserved portion of the former Ho Chi Minh Trail near Sepon, and the bombed-out Buddhist temple and French hospital in the former provincial capital of Xieng Khouang. At many sites, people have built altars to light incense and pray for those who died.
Tourism with a Warning

The Plain of Jars in Xieng Khouang Province is named for the large stone jars scattered throughout the valley, some of which stand six to eight feet tall. In 1998, the Lao government and UNESCO began a multi-year phased program to safeguard and develop the Plain of Jars. Archaeologists think the jars may date from 500 BC to 800 CE and possibly were used as funeral urns (UNESCO 1998). But even here, the war left its mark. At the entrance to the Plain of Jars Site One, a popular tourist destination, signs warn visitors to walk within the white markers and not wander off the path where unexploded bombs remain. Numerous bomb craters are found among the jars with signs indicating when the bombs were dropped. There are also caves where villagers lived during the war.

The MAG office in the center of Phonesavan, Xieng Khouang Province maintains a small exhibit to educate tourists and other visitors on UXO and the organization’s demining work in the region. COPE also has
a visitor center at their facilities in Vientiane with a powerful exhibit that includes personal stories, videos, photographs, art pieces and other displays on the impacts of UXO and the challenges faced by the disabled.

**The Constant Threat**

The psychological strain of living in a dangerous, unstable landscape wears on people as they go about their daily lives. Many farmers must clear and plant their land to grow food for their families never knowing when they might strike a cluster bomblet or other ordnance. Mothers often insist on walking their children to school for fear they will be hurt by UXO along the way. Other parents simply keep their children at home. In some regions, UXO Lao and not-for-profit organizations, such as World Education/Consortium and Handicap International, teach children and adults about the dangers of UXO, how to avoid it and what to do if they find it. A pilot program, implemented by the Swiss Red Cross, trains villagers in the basics of emergency trauma care for UXO injuries. Handicap International is considering a similar program.

**Income from the UXO Sector**

While the presence of UXO provides a major barrier to economic development in many areas, the formal UXO clearance sector also creates jobs. UXO Lao employs over 1,000 people for demining and risk education (UXO Lao 2010). Private demining companies and not-for-profit organizations working on demining, risk education and victim assistance hire hundreds of Lao workers (see as well Schwenkel’s chapter in this volume for demining practices in Vietnam).

In addition to formal UXO clearance programs, an informal sector has developed over the years as locals find innovative ways to reuse bomb materials or sell them. Cluster bomb casings are turned into house supports, fence posts and planter boxes; pineapple-shaped cluster bomblets are defused and used as cooking stoves or oil lamps; and metals are made into tools, pots and dishes. Explosives are sometimes extracted from live ordnance and sold. In recent years, poverty has driven villagers to search for bomb fragments, and sometimes UXO, to sell to foundries for extra cash. A building boom in Vietnam and Laos has increased demand for scrap metal to make rebar for supports in brick buildings. The metals from exploded and unexploded ordnance provide high-quality materials available for a relatively low price. This potential of transformation reflects the
Plate 4.6  Exhibit of cluster bomblets falling at the COPE visitor center Vientiane.
ambivalence of war debris, which has both malevolent and beneficial capacities (see Henig 2012; Saunders 2002).

Informal collection activities can be risky as inexperienced collectors find live munitions and attempt to collect, transport or defuse them. Despite risk education and government laws that make it illegal for individuals to tamper with or take UXO, the practice goes on. People are desperate for the additional income. While in Xieng Khouang Province in 2008, I observed individuals and entire families scouring hillsides with inexpensive metal detectors that can be purchased in Vietnam for as little as $10. A couple drove past on their tractor carrying a large bomb casing. And at the local foundry, there were huge piles of live munitions that had been brought in by local farmers.

To substantially reduce the practice of illegal UXO collection, economic alternatives must be found. MAG identified 86,000 pieces of live munitions in the Xieng Khouang foundry in 2009. The organization has suggested it might be better to legalize collection and train local farmers to safely handle the UXO (Legacies of War 2009). However, this is a controversial proposal. Interference with UXO, including collection, has caused 6.68 percent of all UXO accidents through 2008 (NRA 2009).

Plate 4.7 Bomb casings used for a fence (Photo courtesy of the Humpty Dumpty Institute).
Lives Changed Forever

Almost every family in Laos has a story to tell of how the war and its aftermath affected their lives. The ways in which people cope with living in a violent landscape vary widely. The following individual accounts present a range of reactions and responses.

Lae — Keeper of Tham Piu Cave

Tham Piu cave is a huge limestone cave located in the mountains of Xieng Khouang Province just northeast of Muang Kham village and about two hours from the provincial capital of Phonesavan. Legacies of War members visited Tham Piu cave on 24 August 2008, and met a local villager named Lae, who maintains a small museum and serves as guide for visitors to the cave. At the time of the bombing, he was not in the area, but his whole family died in the cave. The leaflet from the museum states that Tham Piu cave served as a home for a large number of civilian families who were forced to move there once US bombing made it impossible to remain in their villages. On 24 November 1968, two US fighter jets targeted bombs
Plate 4.9  Lae 2008 (Photo courtesy of Boon Vong).

Plate 4.10  Tham Piu Cave (Photo courtesy of Boon Vong).
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directly into the mouth of the cave. The explosions killed 374 people. Most people were incinerated by the explosion, some were buried alive by falling dirt and rocks, while others, trapped inside, died slowly of starvation. When the cave was finally opened, corpses were found holding one another, children clinging to adults.

The cave has become an important Buddhist shrine for local residents and a tourist stop for foreign visitors. Near the parking lot and the museum at the base of the mountain is a memorial with a statue of man carrying a dead child. Partway up the paved path and stairs to the cave is a white shrine. Local visitors and tourists often light incense and candles and leave flowers here in remembrance of the individuals who died in the cave after the fatal American air strike. In honor of those killed, 24 November is a “day of remembrance” in the Lao PDR.

Lae works to keep the history of the war alive. To this day, he is very angry with the Americans. “Why would they kill all these innocent people?” he asked. He wants the world to know what happened at Tham Piu. Lae is bitter that some people try to refute the story of the Tham Piu massacre, saying the cave was used as a base for North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops. He insists this is not true. “Go look for yourself,” he kept repeating.

Manophet — Building a Future for the Young

In August 2008, Manophet took Legacies of War members on a tour of the UXO Lao offices in Phonesavan, to a UXO clearance site and to the local foundry in Xieng Khouang Province. During our time together, he told us the story of his life; a life defined by war and its consequences.

Manophet was a year old in 1971 when a US bombing raid destroyed his family’s village on the Plain of Jars. That night, his parents grabbed their seven children from the burning house, but in the chaos and confusion they became separated. Manophet, his mother and two siblings eventually reached a limestone cave in the mountains. They lived in the cave with three other families for the remainder of the war as bombs fell around them. It was a constant struggle to find food, and several people in the small group died from starvation and illness. Somehow the rest survived, malnourished and weak.

When the war was over, Manophet’s family was reunited. His father and three siblings had spent the intervening years in a refugee camp near Vientiane. The night of the 1971 bombing, Manophet’s 12-year-old brother had been wounded by shrapnel. His father and uncle left him in a cave as
they went to find help, but he was gone when they returned. They assumed he had died.

After the war, when Manophet was 12 years old, he and several friends found a small metal ball and began kicking it around. He walked away for a minute then heard the explosion. Five of his friends died from the shrapnel of a cluster bomblet, or bombie as the Lao call them. As a young man, he and his brother were injured by shrapnel when another bombie exploded near them. Over his lifetime, he knew hundreds of people who were killed or injured by bombies and other UXO.

During the 1990s, Laos opened up to Western countries and allowed more visitors. A Hmong family from the US visited Xieng Khouang in 1994 and brought a picture to Manophet’s parents of their missing child, now an adult. Another Hmong family had found him the night of the bombing and had taken him with them as they walked across the mountains to safety. Eventually, they crossed the Mekong River to a refugee camp in Thailand. Although Manophet’s family was ethnic Lao, the Hmong family adopted the brother Moua and took him with them when they resettled in the US. Moua finished school and is a medical interpreter in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
Moua wrote to his family and in 1997 received permission to visit them for ten days in Vientiane. It was an emotional reunion. To show his gratitude to the Hmong family who raised his brother, Manophet adopted three orphaned Hmong boys and raised them along with his own son.

Manophet taught himself English and worked as a tourist guide then a translator for UXO Lao. He also taught children about the dangers of bombsies and other UXO through a program that is part of the school curriculum. At night, he ran a private English school for young people of all ethnic backgrounds from villages in Xieng Khouang Province. He wanted the next generation to have more opportunities in their lives, a brighter future. Manophet was diagnosed with heart problems in 2008 and died of an aneurism in May 2010 at the age of 41. The provincial hospital in Xieng Khouang was unable to treat his condition. By the time he was flown by helicopter to the hospital in Vientiane, it was too late.

**Thoummy and Bounmy — Cluster Bomb Ban Advocates**

I first met Thoummy and Bounmy in August 2008 at a meeting of Legacies of War and the not-for-profit World Education in Phonesavan, Xieng
Khouang Province. Both young men, born long after the war in Laos had ended, were injured in UXO accidents. At the time of the interview, they were volunteers with World Education, helping victims of UXO accidents to adapt to their injuries. Both were shy and uncertain as they told us their stories.

When Thoummy was eight years old, he hit a cluster bomblet while digging up bamboo shoots with a spade. The explosion left him unconscious. He was taken first to a district clinic then to the regional hospital due to the severity of his injuries. He woke the following day to find he had lost his left hand. It took him several months to recover physically, but much longer to accept the change to his life.

The same year, Bounmy hit a cluster bomblet while digging a fishing pond for his family. He was 16 years old. He was rushed to the nearest medical facility. They were able to save his life, but he lost the lower half of his left arm.

I had a chance to see Thoummy and Bounmy again in November 2010 in Vientiane at the First Meeting of the State Parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM — discussed below). They had both finished school and were working as project assistants for the UXO Survivor Assistance Program at World Education. They were also active in Ban Advocates, a group of UXO survivors who advocate on behalf of the treaty to ban cluster munitions. Thoummy gave a moving speech at the opening ceremonies of the CCM meeting, describing the difficulties of those who have been disabled by UXO and advocating that all countries ban these terrible weapons. I learned Thoummy had recently married. Thoummy and Bounmy have blossomed into confident young men, demonstrating that UXO injuries and disabilities need not hold anyone back from a full and productive life.

**Moving Forward and Finding Hope**

*Progress in the UXO Sector*

Almost four decades after the end of war, UXO remains a critical issue in Laos. The sheer magnitude of the problem, with UXO contaminating one-third of the land, makes it infeasible to eradicate all UXO from the country. It is not cost effective to clear remote, mountainous regions with little or no population. However, it is possible to eradicate UXO from the most populated regions, including areas in and around villages, agricultural lands
and land designated for public and private development projects. This goal is achievable with adequate funding. Yet, only modest progress has been made to date due in part to a slow start in dealing with the problem and the lack of sustained funding to carry out the work.

UXO Clearance

For the first 20 years after the war, Lao villagers had to cope with the overwhelming presence of UXO without any government help or outside humanitarian demining assistance. Before villagers understood the deadly nature of UXO, they often picked up cluster bomblets and other ordnance with their hands and placed them into bomb craters or along fence rows. They tilled their fields, dug irrigation canals and planted gardens on land that had become lethal. It was only after many people died or were injured that villagers learned to be more cautious. And yet, there was little choice but to remove the UXO and plant their fields.

The war left terrible devastation and an economy in shambles, which meant funding for UXO clearance was not available. The Lao PDR began returning to a market-based economy in the late 1980s and accepting assistance from industrialized countries (Laos received a large amount of financial and material aid from the Soviet Union and Vietnam from 1975 up until 1990 when the Communist government in the Soviet Union ended and Russian aid to Laos ceased).

In 1994, the Mennonite Central Committee and MAG sponsored a pilot UXO clearance project in Xieng Khouang Province. When MAG staff arrived in the province, they were shocked to find that villagers accepted the hundreds of UXO deaths and injuries that occurred each year as unavoidable. They thought it was just something they had to live with.17

The Lao government asked the UNDP to create a UXO Trust Fund in 1995 to manage contributions from donor countries for clearance activities, and established UXO Lao, a national demining program in 1996. The NRA was created in 2004 and began coordinating the UXO sector in 2006, while UXO Lao continued demining work in the field. The NRA managed some foreign donations while other countries, such as the US, funded UXO sector not-for-profit organizations directly. As of 2011, there were five international not-for-profits assisting UXO Lao in humanitarian demining and eight commercial companies clearing UXO for development projects in addition to the government’s UXO Lao teams (NRA 2011). In recent years, the Lao Army has done some demining work under contract to foreign entities who are investing in commercial agricultural projects.
However, this work has not been carried out under NRA standards, and most of the acreage cleared has not been reported.

UXO Lao works in the ten most contaminated provinces. Area Clearance Teams clear large tracts of land for release back into agricultural use by local farmers, while Roving Clearance Teams respond to reports of UXO found by local villagers, traveling to these sites to defuse and remove or destroy the ordnance in place.

From 1996 to September 2012, close to 32,000 hectares of land were cleared of UXO. However, this represents less than one percent of all land thought to be contaminated (one-third of the country or 7.9 million hectares) and only 16 percent of the possible 200,000 hectares of high-priority agricultural lands identified by the NRA in the *The Safe Path Forward* reports (discussed below). Over 1.3 million pieces of UXO were destroyed during the same period, including 571,929 cluster bomblets out of an estimated 80 million total and an unknown number of other types of UXO, which are contaminating the land (Government of Laos 2012b). Clearance activities have become more efficient in recent years with better equipment and additional staff training and experience. Charlie Stonecipher of the US State Department Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (WRA) called the UXO clearance sector operations in Laos the gold standard in the field.18

*Funding the UXO Sector*

Funding for the humanitarian UXO sector (as opposed to land cleared for private commercial ventures) in Laos comes almost entirely through donations from foreign countries and international organizations. The Lao PDR government contributes less than one percent of expenditures to the UXO sector, primarily by providing administrative overhead and making small contributions to victim assistance.19 Over the period 1996–2009, 21 countries and the UNDP contributed a total of $119 million for UXO clearance, risk education and victim assistance. Table 4.2 summarizes UXO sector expenditures for 2006–09. Expenditures for clearance operations by non-profit organizations were $46.5 million, while for-profit organization expenditures were $23.2 million.

Contributions to the humanitarian UXO sector averaged $12 million annually from 2006–09. But in recent years, donations have increased significantly in order to help Laos meet the treaty obligations of the CCM. In 2010, individual foreign countries and the European Union provided close to $15.6 million in donations and approximately $15.9 million was donated
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in 2011. Donations in 2012 shot up to almost $34 million with significant contributions from Japan (see Annex 1).²⁰

US funding for the UXO sector in Laos began in 1995 with money from the USAID Leahy War Victims Fund and $80,000 from the WRA. From 1996–2012, the WRA contributed close to $47 million for humanitarian demining, risk education and victim assistance, and the Leahy War Victims Fund contributed about $10 million for victim assistance and general healthcare programs,²¹ an average of $3.2 million annually. In contrast, from 1964–73, the US spent on average $2.7 million per day bombing Laos — or $985.5 million a year for a total of $10 billion over nine years (1964–73 dollars).²²

The US Congress held the first ever hearing on the impact of UXO in Laos in April 2010, helping to educate members of Congress on the issue. And in recent years, Congress increased funding for the UXO sector

Table 4.2 UXO Sector Expenditures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>total</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Clearance Operations</td>
<td>15,787,828</td>
<td>16,669,358</td>
<td>19,558,129</td>
<td>17,674,133</td>
<td>69,689,448</td>
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<tr>
<td>UXO/Mine Risk</td>
<td>175,159</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>94,280</td>
<td>269,439</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim Assistance</td>
<td>2,336,843</td>
<td>874,300</td>
<td>1,078,702</td>
<td>841,382</td>
<td>5,131,227</td>
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<td>NRA</td>
<td>578,762</td>
<td>830,827</td>
<td>1,199,205</td>
<td>1,076,951</td>
<td>3,685,745</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall Total UXO Sector Expenditure</td>
<td>18,878,592</td>
<td>18,374,485</td>
<td>21,836,036</td>
<td>19,686,746</td>
<td>78,775,859</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Average per annum (four years): 19,693,965

Percent Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>overall</th>
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<tr>
<td>Clearance Operations</td>
<td>83.63</td>
<td>90.72</td>
<td>89.57</td>
<td>89.78</td>
<td>88.47</td>
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<td>UXO/Mine Risk</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim Assistance</td>
<td>12.38</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>6.51</td>
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<td>NRA</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>5.49</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>4.68</td>
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<tr>
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<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
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</table>

Source: Table prepared by Michael Boddington primarily from NRA Annual Reports and 2009 information from MAG).
in Laos substantially to $5.1 million in 2010, $5 million in 2011, and $9 million in 2012.\textsuperscript{23} Legacies of War has recommended that Congress consider funding the UXO sector at a minimum of $10 million a year for the next ten years. This would allow humanitarian demining groups to adequately plan their work and operate effectively, that is, retain trained staff and purchase equipment. If funding levels vary substantially year to year, it is very difficult. A consistent, reliable funding stream is essential to successfully clearing priority lands and meeting the treaty obligations of the CCM.

In July 2012, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton made a brief but historic visit to the Lao PDR, becoming the first US Secretary of State to visit the country in 57 years. While in the country, she had the opportunity to visit COPE and meet a 19-year-old man who recently lost his forearms and sight in a cluster bomblet accident. The State Department is considering a regional approach for funding the clearance of UXO in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam and may recommend that Congress provide sustained, long-term funding.

\textit{Victim Assistance}

In 2010, there were four Lao and 13 international not-for-profit organizations as well as six Lao PDR government programs and four United Nations agencies providing victim assistance in the UXO sector (Government of Laos 2010). However, the needs are vast and resources extremely limited as most providers serve a small population in only one or two districts. Victim assistance work includes data collection, medical care, physical rehabilitation, psychosocial rehabilitation, economic rehabilitation/vocational training and advocacy services.

COPE is a local not-for-profit organization in Laos that provides orthotic/prosthetic devices and rehabilitation services, including physiotherapy and occupational therapy. Located in Vientiane, they work in partnership with the Lao National Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) and provincial rehabilitation centers. About 50 percent of the people COPE fits with prosthetics are victims of UXO accidents.\textsuperscript{24} COPE has developed innovative designs for wheelchairs and prosthetics to meet the needs of farmers and villagers living in rural areas of Laos.

Over the four year period 2006–09, victim assistance expenditures in Laos totaled just over $5.1 million. The NRA estimates that $27.4 million is needed over the next five years to provide basic services and meet obligations under the CCM. The largest needs are for village-level trauma response followed by economic rehabilitation (NRA 2010b).
Focusing Attention on the Problem

The Safe Path Forward 2003–2013 and The Safe Path Forward II

The Lao PDR government adopted *The Safe Path Forward 2003–2013* in 2003 and began implementation in 2006. This document outlined a ten-year national strategic plan for clearing UXO from high-priority lands, primarily agricultural lands and other public areas, such as villages, schools, and infrastructure facilities. Clear definitions of what constitutes contaminated lands (for instance, the concentration of UXO, proximity to population, and other factors) still need to be developed, and the government needs to conduct a comprehensive technical survey to identify and prioritize contaminated lands appropriate for clearance. While there are plans to carry out these tasks in cooperation with local districts, work has not yet begun.

On 22 June 2012, the Lao PRD government adopted the *National Strategic Plan for the UXO Sector in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic 2011–2020, “The Safe Path Forward II”* (NRA 2012). This document presents a more comprehensive look at the UXO sector and what is needed to comply with the provisions of the CCM. The document sets out goals, strategic objectives and major actions to update the clearance strategy and needs for risk education and victim assistance.

*The Safe Path Forward II* sites a 2008 sector evaluation as providing useful insights into the amount of land that may require UXO clearance. This study was conducted in the 47 poorest districts of the Lao PDR and found at least 500,000 hectares of contaminated land. Of this amount, 200,000 hectares may be appropriate for clearance and release back into agricultural use (NRA 2012: 2). This study also identified approximately 20 percent of upland rice fields for possible clearance, while the remaining 80 percent might be released through technical surveys. Clearing these lands would take at least 16 years at 2008 funding levels, or with increased funding this could be accomplished in ten years. However, these are not official targets and represent only one evaluation based on existing data, pending a detailed field survey.

The solution of the UXO problem is an integral part of the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In 2010, the Lao government worked with the UNDP to adopt a ninth MDG initiative consistent with the strategy in *The Safe Path Forward II* and commitments under the CCM. Resolving the UXO problem is seen as essential to bringing the country out of poverty and ending its status as a Least Developed Country by 2020.
The Convention on Cluster Munitions

The CCM\textsuperscript{26} is an international treaty to ban the manufacture, use, sale, trade and stockpiling of cluster munitions. Other provisions in the agreement commit the State Parties to destroy existing stockpiles, clear cluster munitions from affected countries and provide victim assistance. The treaty entered into force on 1 August 2010, and the First Meeting of the State Parties to the CCM took place in Vientiane, Laos from 9–12 November 2010. Delegates to this convention adopted the 2010 Vientiane Declaration and the Vientiane Action Plan, detailing provisions for implementing the treaty.\textsuperscript{27} Two additional meeting of the State Parties were held in Beirut, Lebanon on 12–16 September 2011, and Oslo, Norway on 11–14 September 2012.

By 10 October 2012, the CCM had been signed by 111 countries, including most European countries, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and countries in Africa, the Middle East and Central and South America. Of the Signatory States to the CCM, 77 countries had ratified the treaty to become State Parties. A number of countries have already destroyed their stockpiles of cluster munitions at considerable cost. However, other countries who manufacture and/or use cluster munitions have remained outside the process, including the United States, Russia, China, India, Syria and Israel.

As the country with the greatest contamination of cluster bombs in the world and over half of all cluster bomb deaths and injuries worldwide, the Lao PDR took a lead in the treaty process and was one of the first nations to sign and ratify the CCM. The Lao government saw the treaty as an opportunity to focus world attention on the UXO problem in Laos and to attract additional funding for humanitarian demining, risk education and victim assistance. The Lao PDR goals for meeting treaty requirements, which reflect the difficulty of totally eradicating UXO from the country, are defined in the \textit{Safe Path Forward II} and the ninth MDG. The NRA developed a concept paper for implementing the treaty requirements (NRA 2011b).

The key to meeting treaty obligation lies in obtaining adequate funding on a sustained basis, given that the humanitarian UXO sector in Laos is almost entirely dependent on donations from foreign countries and organizations.
Conclusion

The aftermath of the second Indochina War, with nine years of massive US bombing, has haunted Laos for nearly four decades. Since the first US bombs fell in 1964 to the present day, over 50,000 civilians in Laos have fallen victim to accidents from unexploded munitions. In addition to the human toll, remnants of war evoke painful memories for many survivors and exacerbate daunting economic challenges. Living amid the threat of UXO has been a grim reality in the daily lives of far too many people for far too long. Despite risk education programs in schools and villages, men, women and children in up to one-third of the country cannot escape the constant danger. Ironically, at the same time, the UXO sector has become a part of rural economies, providing jobs and income. The people of Laos have learned to cope, transform and innovate while living in a violent environment.

UXO can be considered as a *lieu de mémoire* according to Pierre Nora (1989). Due to its aggressive materiality, it is a constant and at times relentless reminder of the violent past haunting the present livelihoods of the people of contemporary Laos. Moreover, UXO carries a symbolic meaning as being emblematic for civilian victims in (post)war contexts. As an impetus for peace-time political interaction and even as an economic resource, UXO also implies a functional dimension. Yet, there is a consensus that these decentralized and dangerous sites of memory, which constantly evoke past violence, have to be eliminated as soon as possible.

Now there is renewed hope for major progress in eradicating the problem by focusing on reducing casualties and clearing agricultural lands in rural districts where the poorest people struggle to grow enough food and support their families. The significant reduction in UXO casualties since 2008 indicates that UXO clearance and risk education programs are making progress in preventing accidents and saving lives. However, it is not clear if other factors may be at work as well, such as fewer people searching for scrap metal after metal prices declined in the recent economic downturn. But the reduction in casualties is encouraging as the UXO sector looks for increased support for its work.

The Lao PDR, parties to the CCM and other international donors, especially the US, must continue funding work to remediate this terrible legacy and allow the people of Laos to live safely on the land once more.
## Annex I  International donor activities, 2012

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>How much</th>
<th>1 Year equiv in USD</th>
<th>For what</th>
<th>Source(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>European Union</td>
<td>1 Oct. 2012</td>
<td>€1.3mil between Oct. ’12 and Aug. ’15</td>
<td>$568,360</td>
<td>UNDP, UXO Lao, and NRA projects. The funds will be used to support the National Regulatory Authority’s policymaking, UXO sector coordination and regulatory work, as well as the UXO Lao operation in Attapeu province, which includes clearance, roving tasks, surveys, land release, risk education and training.</td>
<td>Vientiane Times (<a href="http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/FreeContent/FreeConten_EU.htm">http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/FreeContent/FreeConten_EU.htm</a>)</td>
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### Annex I continued

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<tr>
<th>Who</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
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<td>$33,974,893</td>
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http://www.undplao.org/newsroom/2012/Press_Release_AusAID_UNDP_Signing_FINAL.pdf
http://laovoclies.com/us-donates-additional-us9-million-for-uxo-clearance/
Notes

1. I would like to thank Mike Boddington, an expert in Disability and Rehabilitation at the National Science Council within the Prime Minister’s Office, Laos PDR, for reviewing this chapter and providing information on the unexploded ordnance (UXO) sector. I’m also grateful to Channapha Khamvongsa, Executive Director of Legacies of War, for her review and access to the organization’s materials and photographs. I appreciate the help of Vivi Saensathit for translating Lao passages and sharing her recollections of war sites visited in Laos. Thank you to Boon Vong for his personal notes and photographs. I am indebted to Fred Branfman and Walter Haney for their important work collecting the stories of bombing victims during the war and bringing the truth to light. I am grateful to UXO Lao for taking me to clearance sites to see fieldwork in progress. My thanks also go to the staff members of the not-for-profit agencies working in the UXO sector in Laos for their important insights on the affects of UXO on the Lao people. Finally, I deeply appreciate the many individuals in Laos who shared their personal memories of the war, loss of loved ones and experiences as survivors of UXO accidents. Kop Chai.

2. Verified data on the total number of civilian casualties during the Lao civil war are not available. Substantial casualties and displacement were described by survivors who fled to the refugee camps near Vientiane during the war and later to the camps in Thailand after the war. It is estimated that 20 percent of the Hmong population died during the war and close to 300,000 people, or 10 percent of the total population, fled Laos by 1980 after the Communist takeover in 1975. See Evans 2002: 150, 178. Also, the 2009 National Regulatory Authority (NRA)’s National Survey of UXO Victims and Accidents Phase 1 reported that from 1964–2008 over 50,000 civilians were killed or injured by unexploded ordnance (UXO) alone.


5. While comprehensive technical surveys of UXO contamination are not available, the official estimations on UXO contamination are based on US military strike data and a Handicap International Belgium 1996–97 partial survey (see Handicap International 1997, 2007).

6. Thai paramilitary forces, organized and trained by the CIA in Thailand, joined the effort to train the insurgent troops (Conboy 1995).
9. The word “‘bombie,’” used in the Lao PDR to describe cluster bomblets, has been in use since the time of the second Indochina War. While it is not documented exactly where it originated, it most likely comes from the French word “*bombe*” in combination with the Vietnamese word for ball bearing “*bi*.” Cluster bomblets have soft metal shells in which hard steel ball bearings are embedded. At the time of the Vietnamese conflict 1964–73, French was the dominant foreign language in the region, and cluster bomblets were in use over Vietnam. Personal correspondence with Mike Boddington, an expert in Disability and Rehabilitation at the National Science Council within the Prime Minister’s Office, Lao PDR and formerly a consultant to the NRA Victim Assistance Office, 17 Apr. 2011, Vientiane, Laos.
11. Comments from staff members of the Lao Disabled People’s Association, World Education and Handicap International in meetings with Legacies of War members in Vientiane, Aug. 2008.
12. Legacies of War (www.legaciesofwar.org) is a US-based nongovernmental organization focused on raising awareness about the history and aftermath of the US bombings in Laos and advocating for increased US funding and support to the UXO sector in Laos.
14. Ibid.
15. The accident that killed the 10-year-old boy (discussed above) also left a piece of shrapnel lodged in the thigh of a 12-year-old boy who was nearby. The boy was also taken to the medical clinic in Sepon, but his parents did not have enough money to pay the doctors to operate to remove the shrapnel. They returned home with only a bandage on his leg. When Legacies visited the village two weeks later, the wound had become infected. Legacies members took the boy to the Savannakhet hospital to remove the shrapnel, but without that intervention, he could have become very ill.
19. Ibid.
20. NRA (2011a) and Legacies of War, Table of International donor activity, see Annex I.
21. Legacies of War Master Fact Sheet, 30 May 2012 (not published). Data from the US State Department Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement’s reports To Walk the Earth in Safety, and based on conversations with WRA staff Charlie Stonecipher.

22. Calculated by Titus Peachy of Mennonite Central Committee using US bombing data and costs per bombing mission contained in the US Senate Congressional Record, 14 May 1975.

23. Legacies of War Master Fact Sheet.


25. The ninth MDG includes three targets: 1) Ensure the complete clearance of UXO from priority/high value agricultural land by 2020; 2) Reduce substantially the number of casualties as a result of UXO incidents; and 3) Ensure the medical and rehabilitation needs of all UXO survivors are met in line with treaty obligations under the Convention on Cluster Munitions (see http://www.la.undp.org/content/lao_pdr/en/home/mdgoverview.html).
