



Photos: Rodney Evans



CRUEL LEGACY

Unexploded bombs, shells and landmines remain throughout those countries of South East Asia affected by decades of war. The threat has prevented people from using fertile land for farming, causing food shortages and population displacement. Australia is helping to address this scourge.

The conflicts that took such a heavy toll on Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam in recent decades may be over but a cruel legacy remains. Thousands of unexploded bombs and landmines lie quietly in wait, ready to be triggered by unlucky passers-by. And thousands of people are still unable to return to their villages.

In Cambodia, where conflict gripped the country for 30 years, the land remains riddled with mines and unexploded shells. The Cambodian Mine Action Centre estimates that 644 sq km of land is

mined and mines are suspected to lie in a further 1,400 sq km. To date more than 155 sq km have been cleared.

The presence and effects of landmines are very obvious in Cambodia where one person in every 384 is an amputee. Whole clinics are devoted to making and fitting artificial limbs. Bodies and lives are slowly being reconstructed.

In the countryside, fields lie fallow. Farmers are unable to plant crops for fear of stepping on mines. But international aid is making a



Landmines displayed at a museum help to educate Cambodians about their dangers. Photo: Rodney Evans

difference. Australia is the largest contributor to the mine action centre and by 2005, will have spent \$40 million on helping Cambodia with demining activities.

The picture is similar in Laos. It is believed more than two million tonnes of ordnance were dropped onto the country mainly by the United States, but also by the Thai and Lao Air Forces during the war, especially between 1964–1973. The organisation responsible for clearing unexploded ordnance around the country, UX Lao, estimates up to 30 per cent remains unexploded (see sidebar: *UXO in Laos – fact sheet*).

The proportion of children to adults killed or injured in incidents involving mines or unexploded shells appears to be rising.

While adults remember only too well the bombing years, their children have no such memories. The temptation to pick up an object of curiosity can prove too much, often with devastating consequences (see sidebar: *Sport in a box*).

Australia is working with multilateral organisations such as UNICEF and non-government organisations to support demining activities in Laos.

In Viet Nam, the government believes a total of 16,478 sq km have been affected by mines and unexploded ordnance. It is estimated that 350,000 tons remain hidden.

Large numbers of mines remain in northern and southern provinces from border conflicts

with China and Cambodia in the later 1970s and 1980s.

The toll on the population since the end of the war until 1998 has been heavy. A survey completed in 1998 found 38,248 people had been killed and 64,064 injured. The figure will continue to climb until all landmines and unexploded ordnance have been destroyed.

Australia is one of a few countries helping the Vietnamese Government with mine clearance. Through AusAID, two teams of 10 technicians are receiving equipment and training to deal with mines and unexploded ordnance in the Thua Thien Hue Province, removing the threat of landmines for 35,000 men, women and children and at the same time, improve agricultural production.

Agricultural production is also being expanded through a community credit fund, demonstration plots and nurseries and small infrastructure projects. Vietnamese agricultural experts are providing technical training and advice in agricultural production.

Nearly 6,700 farming households in the selected communes who presently live with the threat of unexploded ordnance will benefit from the \$3.59 million project. It will run for three years until 2005 and will be implemented by Australian Volunteers International and the Mines Advisory Group, an international humanitarian mine action organisation. EJ

Source: *Landmine Monitor Report 2000: Toward a mine-free world*, International Campaign to Ban Landmines <www.icbl.org> Rodney Evans <www.allangles.com.au>



UXO IN LAOS – FACT SHEET

- » The Lao People's Democratic Republic suffered intense ground battles as well as extensive bombing during the Indochina war period from 1964 to 1973.
- » More than two million tons of ordnance fell on Laos during the war, or the equivalent of one plane-load of bombs every eight minutes around the clock for nine full years.
- » Such fighting has left a legacy of widespread contamination by UXO that still causes death and injury more than 25 years after the war ended.
- » Approximately 25 per cent of villages suffer UXO contamination and all but two of the 18 provinces report UXO contamination.
- » An average of 200 people per year in Laos are UXO victims. About one UXO accident occurs every two days. Approximately half of these victims are children.

Source: UNICEF <www.unicef.org>