9 – 12 November:  
Vientiane Meeting on cluster munitions

Making the Oslo Treaty a reality in the country worst affected by cluster-munitions
Contents

Laos, a country ravaged by war p.3

Testimony of Phet, Ban Advocate, cluster munition survivor p.4

Children, the main victims of cluster munitions p.5

The Oslo Treaty, a key driving force for the development of Laos p.6

Vientiane Meeting p.7

Handicap International: day-to-day assistance for survivors p.8

Appendices p.10

- Cluster munitions
- About Handicap International
- Laos contamination maps
- Photos
- Videos

Cover picture: © Z. Johnson/Handicap International
Laos, a country ravaged by war

Surface area: 236,800 sq.km.
Number of inhabitants: 6.67 million
Number of cluster munitions dropped: 270 million, an average of more than 40 cluster munitions per inhabitant
Victims: more than 100 a year, of which 60% are children.

One of the smallest countries in Asia, Laos holds the dubious record as the country most contaminated by cluster munitions in the world. During the Vietnam War, the United States dropped more than 270 million cluster munitions over Laos, despite the fact that the country was not part of the conflict. Although the war in Indo-China ended nearly 40 years ago, the conflict has left behind deep scars that still affect innocent victims today. This is a daily reality for thousands of communities who often live in the most isolated areas of Laos.

Working in the region for more than 14 years, Handicap International’s teams have a clear idea of the impact of these explosive remnants of war on these often extremely poor and all too often forgotten people. It is generally daily tasks such as working in the fields, gathering wood and playing games on the edge of forests that most often end in tragedy. Numerous reports and statistics clearly reveal the human and socio-economic impact of the permanent presence of these unexploded ordnance and cluster munitions, particularly on local populations.

The following figures reveal the scale of the situation in Laos1:

- 25% of villages in Laos are contaminated by cluster munitions (see appendix maps).
- 41 of 46 of the country’s poorest districts are affected. Most victims are from the poorest sections of society, living in rural areas, often far from emergency medical facilities.
- More than 50,000 people were killed or injured in an accident caused by explosive remnants of war between 1964 and 2008, almost half during peace time.

1 The National Regulatory Authority for UXO/Mine Action in the Lao PDR, June 2010.
Testimony of cluster munitions victim and Ban Advocate, Phet Latxabout

Phet Latxabout was born on 13 February 1946 at Muong Phine, in the province of Savannakhet, in Laos. Phet attended her village primary school before starting at secondary school. When the Vietnam War broke out, Phet left school to look after soldiers and to cook for them, setting up home in one of the many caves in which the Laotian population took shelter from American bombs and soldiers.

“IT was October 1966. I was walking with three friends to a place where there was a military encampment; my foot hit an unexploded cluster munition. It exploded instantly, shattering the bones in my left leg and peppering my whole body with metal fragments. Two of my friends were also injured, and one died. After the explosion, I lay in the field, covered with blood, fighting desperately against the pain. We were close to my village when the accident occurred. Friends rushed to help and took me to the doctor who worked in the caves where the soldiers of the Laotian army were stationed. The doctor amputated my left leg because the bones were so badly fractured. I stayed in the cave alone for a month, while the others left for the battle field. I felt extremely lonely and I cried a lot. They were very tough times.

I gradually learned to live without my leg and had enough to live on. My family really knew how to take care of me and I fought hard to stay alive for them and to create the best living conditions for myself that I could.”

Phet now has six children and six grandchildren. She does housework during the day, tending the family’s goats and looking after her grandchildren. She was fitted with an orthopaedic device by Handicap International in 2008.

She now works alongside the association as part of a cluster munitions victims group who provide testimonies during international meetings and conferences on this issue. They are Ban Advocates. Like dozens of other victims in Laos, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Serbia, Iraq, Albania, Croatia, Vietnam and Lebanon, who have become spokespersons for the cause, Phet has played a crucial role in the fight against cluster munitions. Her testimony helped convince state representatives to ensure their governments signed the Oslo Treaty, leading to its entry into force on 1 August 2010.

She also plays an important role in her community by taking part in awareness programmes on the risks of unexploded ordnance: “I see people in my village taking risks, mostly children gathering metal objects, who are unaware of the danger. So I talk to them about it everyday, and they take fewer risks now. I also advise other survivors to take advantage of the rehabilitation centres to improve their mobility.”

Learn more www.banadvocates.org
Children, the main victims of cluster munitions

In Laos, children are the main victims of cluster munitions. **Between 1979 and 2008, 60% of civilian victims were young boys** - a third more than the average of other affected countries.

Reports reveal that children are often wounded or killed when their daily routine brings them into contact with mines or cluster munitions, such as on their way to school or playing games. In some countries weakened by war, such as Laos, children have no other choice than to supplement their family’s incomes in this way. They tend herds, collect wood or look for food. Easy to find, metal can be sold on the open market and represents a favoured means of subsistence for children. This leads them to handle explosive remnants of war and to expose themselves to very serious injuries and sometimes even death.

Injured children who survive their injuries are often seriously mutilated and have specific and complex needs in terms of survivor assistance. If their injuries require the amputation of one or more limbs, their rehabilitation assistance requirements are more complex; they need new prostheses as they grow older and corrective surgery to replace them.

Child survivors often have to end their studies prematurely because of the time spent convalescing and the financial burden rehabilitation places on their families. Children rarely receive psychological support to deal with their trauma, despite the fact that the psychological effects can last their whole lives.

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2 The National Regulatory Authority for UXO/Mine Action in the Lao PDR, June 2010.
The Oslo Treaty (3 December 2008), a key driving force for the development of Laos

The Oslo Treaty banning cluster munitions entered into force on 1 August 2010. The treaty bans the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of these devastating weapons. It also requires states Parties to clear contaminated areas and to provide support to the survivors of these weapons. It is the first time that the needs of survivors and their communities have been so extensively taken into consideration, with states required to allocate financial and human resources to help survivors, their families and communities.

Article 5, broadly based on recommendations made by NGOs in the field including Handicap International, defines a state’s survivor assistance obligations as information-gathering, medical care, physical rehabilitation, psychological support, social and economic inclusion, and laws and public policies on disability. Survivor assistance is mentioned in a separate article and defines survivors in the broadest terms as injured persons and their families and communities. The article sets out a

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Since 2001, Handicap International’s “Policy Unit” in Belgium has developed extensive experience of survivor assistance and information gathering for the Landmine Monitor report and, starting this year, the report on cluster munitions. The team has also published two other reports, Fatal Footprint (2006) and Circle of Impact (2007), which remain benchmark publications on the humanitarian impact of cluster munitions. These reports not only drew on work performed in Laos in 1996, they also boosted the momentum of the Oslo process, particularly the definition of the article on survivor assistance. In 2009, Handicap International added to its body of research with Voices from the Ground. This study is the first to give a voice to people living under the daily threat of these weapons. Learn more: http://en.handicapinternational.be/Voices-from-the-Ground_a616.html
comprehensive and non-discriminatory assistance process based on the needs of survivors, coordinated and based on measurable plans. States Parties are required to produce annual reports on their progress. Based on this article, the cluster munitions ban treaty establishes an international norm that represents the highest standard in the field of survivor assistance.

Article 4 of the treaty requires states to clear contaminated land. All states Parties commit themselves to decontaminating their territory within ten years. This measure should bring about major changes in Laos, with crop fields, rice fields, villages and roads being cleared before 1 August 2020.

Laos was the second country to sign the Cluster Bomb Ban Treaty on 3 December 2008 after Norway. Laos ratified the treaty on 18 March 2009. It will play host to the first meeting of states Parties in November in its capital Vientiane.

Vientiane Meeting

The first official meeting of states Parties in Laos from 9 to 12 November marks an essential step towards putting the treaty into practice. States Parties are expected to underline their commitment to applying the treaty, agree on measures to include in an action plan to put the convention’s requirements into practice, particularly in terms of clearance and survivor assistance, and to promote it by calling on all non-signatory states to sign it.

The countries should also outline the budgets they have allocated to implement the treaty.

Handicap International intends to monitor the situation closely to ensure that funding obligations are effectively met. The treaty, even once in force, will only have a minimal impact in the field if it is not supported by funding. One of the association’s main objectives will be to provide optimal support to survivors to convey their message to the relevant authorities and to help them set up inclusive health, rehabilitation, education and socio-economic services best adapted to the needs of the populations in question. By employing exclusively Laotian clearance and risk education teams, Handicap International is sending out a clear message to the international community. The association promotes investment as close as possible to the direct beneficiaries themselves and involves them as key stakeholders in the fight against cluster munitions.

According to Jean-Marc Boivin, responsible for Political Action and Advocacy at Handicap International, “Benefiting from the support of cluster munitions survivors in performing their advocacy activities, associations have highlighted the day-to-day problems faced by survivors in the field. They have also made very strong to the whole of the international community that it is unacceptable to neglect and abandon hundreds of thousands of people to their own devices. Human rights abuses continue to go unpunished and that’s intolerable. That’s why we are continuing our campaign.”

Much remains to be done in the field.
Handicap International in Laos: day-to-day assistance for survivors

In 1996, in close conjunction with the Ministry for Work and Social Affairs, Handicap International performed the first national study into the socio-economic impact of unexploded ordnance, which covers more than two thirds of Laotian territory. Twelve years later, this study is still used to determine all key priorities. Since then, Handicap International has been working in Laos to reduce the threat and impact of explosive remnants of war and performs clearance and risk education actions in three of the worst affected districts of the province of Savannakhet: Nong, Villabuly and Xepon.

Since 2006, the clearance teams have cleared more than 1,200,000 sq.m. of land and destroyed 8,445 explosive remnants of war. The association has also set up a local bomb removal team which travels to sites at the request of communities to eliminate specified threats. It has intervened in over 70 villages since 2006.

Handicap International has also developed and uses a cluster munitions risk education module aimed specifically at parents. Teams work with families involved in metal collection mainly sourced from explosive remnants of war to encourage them to adopt behaviour that limits the risk of accidents.

A pilot market garden project is also underway to offer alternative solutions to people involved in the collection of explosive remnants of war. Some fifty families (half of which have at least one family member with disabilities) have received several weeks of training focused on the use of variegated seeds and techniques for composting and maintaining gardens. These families have all reduced or totally stopped collecting metal. The project also intends to improve the nutritional intake of these
families. Other families not directly concerned by the project have adopted the taught techniques. The original concept has also been adapted to other provinces in Laos by several other organisations.

Building on its experience in the field, Handicap International helps the government improve its general community health facilities. These must not only benefit survivors of accidents caused by cluster munitions but also all impoverished populations with restricted access to basic health care.

According to Luc Delneuville, Handicap International’s field programme director in Laos, “By including communities in clearance, risk education, and income-generating and advocacy activities, we find that it has a tangible impact on our work. Local populations “take ownership” of the activities themselves and are directly involved in decision-making. This gives real meaning to our humanitarian commitment.”
Appendices

Cluster munitions

- **How cluster munitions work**: Cluster munitions are offensive weapons designed to saturate or neutralise an area in which one or more military targets are located (facilities, vehicles and troops). They can be dropped from aircraft or fired from the ground. The container opens in the air and ejects cluster munitions which are scattered over a wide area, often resulting in civilian victims. In principle designed to explode on contact with the ground or a target, an estimated 5% to 40% of cluster munitions do not explode on impact and continue to mutilate and kill long after the end of a conflict. They therefore have the same consequences as anti-personnel mines.

- **Cluster bombs at a glance**:
  - 39 countries and territories* are now likely to be affected by the presence of unexploded cluster munitions, starting with South East Asia where 383 million cluster munitions were dropped between 1965 and 1975;
  - The US, France, Israel, the UK, Russia... a total of 15 states have used cluster munitions since 1965, as well as several armed groups;
  - 34 states have produced cluster munitions since the 1950s; 17 were suspected of still producing them in 2009;
  - Several billion cluster munitions are currently stockpiled by 74 states. The US alone has a stockpile of between 750 million and 1 billion cluster munitions.

* Learn more [www.sousmunitions.org](http://www.sousmunitions.org)
About Handicap International

Handicap International is an independent international aid organisation working in situations of poverty and exclusion, conflict and disaster. Working alongside disabled and vulnerable people, our action and testimony are focused on responding to their essential needs and improving their living conditions. Handicap International also promotes respect for their dignity and their fundamental rights. Since its beginnings in 1982, Handicap International has set up development programmes in over 60 countries and works in numerous emergency situations. There are eight national associations in the Handicap International network: Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Luxembourg, UK, USA and Switzerland. Together, they mobilise resources and jointly manage projects and extend the association’s principles and actions around the world. Handicap International is one of six founding associations of the international campaign to ban landmines (ICBL) and co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. Since 2003, Handicap International has been committed to the fight against cluster munitions. It is a founding member of the Cluster Munition Coalition (CMC) and a key stakeholder in the development of the Oslo Treaty banning these weapons.

Handicap International operates and campaigns wherever it is not always easy to “stand tall”.

Handicap International
Map of contaminated areas in Laos

Laos

Province of Savannaketh
. **Press photographs**

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For other photos of Laos, a contact sheet is available from the following address:
 ftp://ftp.handicap-international.fr/
 Username: invite
 Password: invite
 Path: /download/PhotosLaos

. **Videos:**

  - **Unexploded:** (international version) + shotlist
    40 minutes
    Made by Philippe Cosson (Pluie du diable) in June 2010, this documentary combines archive images, images shot in the province of Savannakhet, the testimonials of survivors, Handicap International representatives in Laos and an official representative of Laos on the issue of cluster munitions. This is a poignant documentary on the dramatic situation facing the country and the association’s response to it.

  - **Ban Advocates: from victims to champions**
    20 min.
    Made by Chris Anderson in summer 2009, the film provides an introduction to the Ban Advocates initiative and reflects on the experiences of survivors up to their arrival in Oslo, and the role they played in the process leading to the ban on cluster munitions. It was screened to mark the entry into force of the treaty on 1 August 2010, and on other occasions.

  - **Lao’s Bitter Harvest**
    23 min.
    This 25 minute documentary produced in English for the “One Square Mile” series broadcast on the BBC was screened for the first time in September 2010. Shot in the village of Xuong Tai in Savannakhet province in July 2010, it offers an insight into an area of Laos targeted by cluster munitions on a daily basis during the war.

These videos are available at the following address:
 ftp://ftp.handicap-international.fr/
 Username: invite
 Password: invite
 Path: /download/PhotosLaos