



Lao PDR: Five children killed in cluster bomb blast

Rights of survivors, urgent clearance of remnants should be priorities at November meeting

(London, 11 March 2010) – Five children were killed and one injured when a cluster submunition exploded in a village in Lao PDR's Champasak province on 22 February 2010. The incident highlights the need for urgent action to assist survivors and ensure the clearance of cluster munition remnants when states parties to the treaty banning cluster bombs gather for their first official meeting in the Lao capital, Vientiane, this November, the Cluster Munition Coalition (CMC) said today.

“Children in Lao PDR continue to bear the brunt of accidents from ‘bombies’ left as the deadly legacy of a secret war that ended decades ago,” said Channapha Khamvongsa, Executive Director of Legacies of War, a CMC member organisation that advocates for the removal of unexploded ordnance in Lao PDR. “Accidents like this one occur with sickening regularity in Lao and underline the need for governments to adopt an ambitious plan in November for cleaning up cluster bomb contamination in Lao and elsewhere.”

According to Lao government sources, a group of eight children found a BLU-3 cluster submunition while they were feeding buffalo in rice paddies about 2 km from the village of Ban Noundeng Nue, in the Soukhouma district of Champasak province, near the border with Thailand. The device exploded while the children were playing with it in a hut on stilts in the rice paddies. The blast instantly killed five of the children and injured one, while two who were farther away were not harmed. The US widely used BLU-3 cluster submunitions – also called pineapple bombs because of their resemblance to the fruit – in bombing raids over Lao PDR in the 1960s and 70s.

“If this kind of tragedy happened in the US, there'd be a national outcry,” said Titus Peachey, Director of Peace Education for the Mennonite Central Committee, a CMC member organisation. “The Lao people are doing all they can to deal with a problem they did not create, but much more support is needed. With the First Meeting of States Parties taking place in Lao PDR in November, we have an opportunity like no other to find solutions to this ongoing injustice against the people and communities suffering from this weapon.”

The Lao National Regulatory Authority for the UXO/Mine Action Sector has promised a detailed investigation of the accident, but it will be delayed due to a current backlog of accidents under investigation.

Lao PDR is the most heavily bombed country, per capita, in the world, with 14 out of 17 provinces affected by unexploded ordnance (UXO) left over from a “secret war” waged by the United States against Pathet Lao insurgents four decades ago. From 1964 to 1973, the US led more than 580,000 bombing missions in Lao PDR – equating to a mission every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, over nine years – dropping more than 2 million tons of bombs and blanketing the countryside with some 270 million submunitions.

Known locally as “bombies,” unexploded cluster submunitions are commonplace in Lao PDR and – along with landmines and other explosive remnants of war – continue to claim up to 300 new victims per year, decades after the armed conflict ended. A recent nationwide survey recorded 50,136 UXO casualties between 1963 and 2008, 40 percent of which happened after the bombing ceased, and 26 percent of which were children. In the period of 2004-2007, cluster submunitions were the largest cause of civilian casualties.

Because of the immense scale of cluster bomb devastation in Lao PDR, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work with the government to reduce the impact of explosive remnants of war on civilians, by clearing contaminated land and providing mine-risk education and assistance to victims and affected communities. NGOs actively involved in this work in Lao include AAR Japan, COPE National Rehabilitation Centre, Handicap International, Mines Advisory Group and Norwegian People's Aid.

Cluster bombs also continue to claim civilian lives in neighbouring Cambodia and Vietnam. In Vietnam, a 40-year-old man was killed by a cluster submunition explosion in Quang Tri province on 12 February, leaving behind a wife and six daughters. The CMC urges both countries to follow Lao PDR's example and sign the Convention on Cluster Munitions to gain access to much-needed victim assistance.

Less than two years since the Convention opened for signature in Oslo in December 2008, a total of 104 countries have signed, and it will take effect on 1 August after reaching 30 ratifications in February. The next milestone will be the First Meeting of States Parties in Lao PDR in November.

The Convention comprehensively bans use, production, and transfer of cluster munitions and sets strict deadlines for stockpile destruction and clearance of contaminated land within eight years and 10 years respectively. In addition, the Convention obliges states to support survivors and affected communities.

The CMC called on all states not currently on board the ban treaty to sign and ratify as soon as possible, and urged countries that have already ratified to step up implementation of their treaty obligations.

For more information on casualties caused by cluster submunitions, landmines and other explosive remnants of war in Lao PDR, please visit the following:

- *Landmine Monitor 2009* country chapter on Lao PDR:
http://lm.icbl.org/index.php/publications/display?act=submit&pqs_year=2009&pqs_type=lm&pqs_report=lao
- *Banning Cluster Munitions: Government Policy and Practice* country chapter on Lao PDR:
http://lm.icbl.org/index.php/publications/display?act=submit&pqs_year=2009&pqs_type=cm&pqs_report=lao