



Legacies of Agent Orange and Bombies

Laos Fact Sheet

War Legacies Project

Laos holds the per capita record as the most heavily bombed country in world history.

For ten years (1964-1973), the CIA conducted intensive daily aerial bombing campaigns over northern and southern Laos using automated air war techniques. Local mercenary armies and U.S. military units were sworn to secrecy. Two-thirds of Laos was subjected to 580,344 bombing missions and a total of more than two million tons of aerial-dropped explosive ordnance. The bombing equates to one B-52 plane load of bombs being dropped every eight minutes for nine years—about two tons of bombs per person.

Most Americans, indeed most of the world, have never heard about the CIA's Secret Air War in Laos.

The CIA and its covert military units conducted this automated air war beyond the watchful eyes or interest of the world's media. The war was never publicly sanctioned or approved by the U.S. Congress. Historian Geoffrey Gunn claims that the "U.S.-Laos theatre of the sixties and early seventies remains one of the least studied areas in western scholarship on Indochina."

The poorest and most undeveloped ethnic groups of Laos have been most affected by the post-war legacies—unexploded ordnance, environmental and human effects of Agent Orange defoliation, and enormous social and economic disruption.

Today, poverty mapping shows a strong correlation with the areas subjected to the intense and long air war. Yet no systematic recording of the post-war legacies has yet been done.

The U.S. accounts of the bombing and defoliation of Ho Chi Minh Trail fail to mention that the area is home to small indigenous ethnic groups of the southern Annamite mountains. They are the Makhong, Taliang, Ta-oy, Oy, Alak, Bru, Tri, to name a few. During the warfare, these ethnic groups suffered silently. They lost their homes, fields and forests; they were subjected to toxic herbicide spraying (Agents Orange, Purple, Blue and White) for at least five years. By all accounts, they remain the least educated, the most disease-ridden, and the poorest peoples in Laos. They are highly vulnerable and fragile societies and the least able to cope with external complications.

Agent Orange Legacy

Along the southern mountainous spine between Laos and Viet Nam ran the Vietnamese military transport route, known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Like in Viet Nam, the area was extensively and regularly sprayed with herbicides from



1962 to 1971. Unlike with Viet Nam, few outsiders know about it.

The 1962 Geneva Accords proclaimed Laos a neutral country and forbade outside military involvement there. As the U.S. war in Viet Nam escalated, however, neither the U.S. nor North Viet Nam were able to resist intervening. As local Laotian revolutionaries and their Vietnamese allies built a network of paths along the border, later termed the “Ho Chi Minh Trail,” covert U.S. operations used every means available to try to stop them. Among these methods was defoliation by herbicides, especially Agent Orange.

Herbicides had a military purpose of clearing land around roads and trails so that enemy movements could be detected and stopped. The environmental and human consequences never entered the calculation. By far the greater concern was preservation of secrecy.

The use of herbicides was reported on during the conflict but officially denied until 1982 when Air Force historian William Buckingham’s draft of the *Operation Ranch Hand* study was made public under a Freedom of Information Act request by the National Veterans Task Force on Agent Orange. According to Buckingham, the U.S. Air Force conducted herbicide operations in Laos from December 1965 to September 1969.

In 1999, the U.S. Government released the first set of undisclosed Operation Ranch Hand herbicide spray records to the Lao government. According to these U.S. Defense Department records, millions of liters of Agent Orange and other dioxin contaminating herbicides were sprayed on Laos during the war from 1965 and 1971. This disclosure, though incomplete, represents the only official account of the secret herbicide spraying activities in Laos. In 2005 the Lao Government began to test a few sites as part of the Persistent Organic Pollutants Treaty.

How extensive was the spraying? Are health consequences from Agent Orange spraying showing up in Laos? Are deformities, reproductive problems and cancers on the increase in sprayed areas? Do ecological consequences persist? Currently, the data is incomplete.

Furthermore, the hidden health and environmental dangers of Agent Orange may be compounding livelihood problems for some of the poorest people. The sprayed zones are home to small, remote aboriginal groups, facing the serious risks of extinction.

A full accounting and disclosure are long overdue.

“Bombie” Legacy

Vast amounts of unexploded ordnance (UXO) continue to litter almost two-thirds of the Lao countryside. Since 1975, live ordnance has killed about



12,000 people and crippled, blinded and dismembered tens of thousands of Lao farmers, according to the United Nations Development Program and the Lao Unexploded Ordnance Program ([UXO-Lao](#)). Over the next century, the financial estimates by the UNDP for clearing UXO go into the billions of dollars over the next 50 years. Currently, after then-President Obama's visit to Laos in 2016, the U.S. Government is committing to a pledge of \$40 million for FY2021.

The most prevalent and dangerous of explosives are the anti-personnel bomblets or anti-civilian "bombies." These tennis ball-size bomblets are scattered through air drops of a large "mother bomb" which opens and spews out in mid-air the bombies which then act as landmines. Today many live bombies remain hidden below the soil surface. Victims include children playing with them like a toy, people collecting scrap metal to feed their families and people cooking over a hidden bombie. Now the story is gaining some attention thanks to an uptick in international press coverage.

Here it is interesting to note that for twenty years after the end of the war (1976-1995), there was no official UXO removal program. UXO-Lao only began in 1996, after a special UN Trust Fund was created.

Why did it take so long and so many lives to address this stark problem? This is due to the secrecy of the War, its history and long-term effects were not embedded into public consciousness during those two decades. The Lao-educated citizenry was not aware and speaking about these legacies. Even international assistance staff did not know the history of the war that well either. And few journalists came to visit this isolated country, while attention in the region was focused on Viet Nam and Cambodia.