



AMERICAS SECRET WAR

SHORT STORIES

23/07

LAOS BOMBING 1964 to 1973

From 1964 to 1973, the US secret service CIA bombed large parts of Laos, almost unnoticed by world public opinion. To lay waste to an entire region in a distant neutral country, by-passing the US Parliament, in such a way as to make it the most bombed region in the world, is extraordinarily brazen and unscrupulous. The American CIA's secret war in Laos is well known to experts. The general public, on the other hand, has at best only heard the country name Laos, a small state beyond the world political headlines in Southeast Asia. But the war there, denied by Washington for years, is probably unknown to most even more than 50 years after its end.



American Bombs, Phonsavan

"The bombs, as one Laotian recalled, "fell like rain" ... Given our history here, I believe that the United States has a moral obligation to help Laos heal... Laos is the most heavily bombed nation in history... More bombs than the amount used during the whole of World War Two".

- Barack Obama

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Mines Advisory Group, Phonsavan

Bombs in Laos

Laos is the most heavily bombed country in the world, per capita. More than two million tons of bombs were dropped on Laos between 1964 and 1973. An estimated 30 per cent of them did not detonate, and continue to kill and injure. They also prevent communities from growing enough food and accessing schools, hospitals and clean water. Khammouane Province in central Laos was a target for US bombing. The airstrikes were mostly aimed at disrupting movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail – a key logistical supply route used by the North Vietnamese.

Mines Advisory Group (MAG)

British Army engineer Rae McGrath founded the Mines Advisory Group near Cockermouth in the English Lake District in 1989. McGrath experienced first-hand the terrible impact of landmines and unexploded bombs on civilians when he served in the British Army and worked for NGOs in Afghanistan. He saw how these weapons hampered reconstruction and the delivery of aid. He wanted MAG to make the world aware of the problem of landmines. In 1992, Lou McGrath joined his brother at MAG, and the organisation joined forces with Human Rights Watch, Medico International, Handicap International (now Humanity and Inclusion), Physicians for Human Rights and the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation to form the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) coalition. Years of campaigning, research and lobbying against the arms trade paid off in 1997 when the Ottawa Treaty, also known as the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty, banning the production and use of anti-personnel mines, was signed by 122 countries. MAG clears and liberates land from bombs in many post-war areas of the world today. MAG's current campaigns aim to revive support for demining and ensure that people affected by landmines are not forgotten.

Cluster Bombs

Cluster munitions consist of a container and the submunitions it contains. It is dropped from the air or fired from the ground and spreads its bomblets over a wide area ranging from the size of a few football fields to several hundred hectares. A salvo from the MLRS launcher, for example, scatters up to 8,000 pieces of submunition



Cluster Bombs, Laos

over an area of about 250,000 m2 (equivalent to 50 football fields). Due to the untargeted effect (they cannot distinguish between military and civilian targets), civilians are also hit in almost every operation. In addition, huge amounts of unexploded ordnance remain: up to 40 per cent of submunitions fail to explode on impact, in individual cases even up to 100 per cent. Unlike the fuses of unexploded ordnance from large bombs, their detonators are highly sensitive and can explode at the slightest touch. Thus, long after an attack, the bombs continue to endanger the people who live or work in the affected areas.



Path Cleared of Bombs, Phonsavan

Victims of the Bombies

About 80 million explosive devices from cluster bombs are still stuck in Laotian soil. The Laotians call them bombies. "Up to a hundred victims still lose their arms, legs, eyesight or lives every year," reports an old villager. As a simple peasant girl, a dud tore off a leg. That is why she has become a campaigner against cluster bombs. In schools, she warns children not to play with unexploded ordnance. She tries to stop villagers from searching for bombs in order to sell the war scrap as scrap metal.

MAG Laos Programme

Laos has the unenviable title of being the most bombed country in the world per capita. For almost a decade, Laos was heavily bombed by the US as part of the war in Indochina. Since 1994, MAG has helped more than 1,145,000 people in Xieng Khouang and Khammouane provinces to live safely, free from danger and fear. Our teams have cleared more than 100,000,000 square metres of land in Laos, removing and destroying more than 314,000 unexploded ordnance, including more than 180,000 cluster munitions. MAG has also conducted more than 3,800 risk education talks with around 138,000 people, helping them to stay safe until the site is cleared.

Free-load-area

The supply route for the Viet Cong was the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Americans therefore tried to destroy the supply route. They scattered cluster bombs everywhere, in nearly 600,000 sorties. If the bombers could not drop all the shells on targets, there were so-called free-load areas in Laos on which they simply dropped the rest. Because it was too dangerous for the planes to land with full bomb bays, they opened their bellies and spat out the deadly weapons, huge cluster bombs filled with hundreds of smaller explosive devices called bombies. Millions of them still lie unexploded in the ground. There have been 20,000 explosions in the past 40 years, thousands of dead, more than half are children; men missing their hands, children without legs, women with one arm - it is a common sight in Laos.



Bombs Ammunition, Phonsavan Visiter Center



Part of a Tank, Phonsavan Visiter Center

Cutlery and jewellery

Shell splinters, bomb remnants and other remnants of the war are made into cutlery and jewellery.

The villagers mainly collect aluminium remnants. The light metal has a lower melting point than iron. Therefore, the farmers can easily liquefy it in self-built kilns in their villages and then cast jewellery from it. The bangles, earrings, pendants and brooches are now popular all over the world. Melting down aluminium helps people in the war-torn country find a way out of their poverty and at the same time helps to defuse the explosive legacy.



Earth Kiln, Cha Ho, Phaxay District, Xieng Khouang

The Swiss company Article 22 initiated the "PeaceBomb" project in 2010 together with local artists and the NGO Helvetas. The project ensures that useful things such as jewellery, for example bracelets or chain pendants, are made from war scrap.



Wooden Mould for Melting, Cha Ho

The jewellery is then sold at night markets, for example in Luang Prabang. The proceeds go to local artists and to farmers living in areas contaminated by mines and bombs.



Aluminium Spoon, Cha Ho

One spoon cast from aluminium is removed from the wooden mould.



Aluminium Products, Cha Ho

Cast aluminium earrings and cutlery.

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