

Photo Essay – July 2023



The Deadly Legacy of Laos - From War Scrap to a Glimmer of Hope

This photo essay examines the enduring humanitarian and environmental legacy of conflict in Laos, alongside the resilience of its rural communities.



American bombs, Phonsavan

Most Heavily Bombed Country

Between 1964 and 1973, the **CIA** conducted a secret war here, almost unnoticed by the world public. The goal was to disrupt the **Ho Chi Minh Trail** - an important supply route for the North Vietnamese. In those roughly ten years, over two million tons of bombs were dropped on Laos. This makes it by far the **most heavily bombed country per capita in the world** today. If bombers could not reach their actual targets, they simply dropped their cargo over so-called "**free-load areas**" just to be able to land safely.

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Cluster bombs, Laos



Path cleared of bombs, Phonsavan

The most terrible weapon of this war was cluster bombs. These containers drop up to 8,000 small explosive devices (locals call them **"bombies"**) over huge areas the size of 50 football fields. The fatal part: Up to 40 percent of this extremely sensitive ammunition did not explode upon impact. An estimated 80 million of these unexploded duds still lie in the ground today. They prevent the cultivation of food, block paths to schools, and claim up to 100 victims annually - mostly children or farmers in their fields.



Mines Advisory Group, Phonsavan

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Turning War Scrap into Hope

Fortunately, there are heroes who stand up to this danger. Founded in 1989, the **Mines Advisory Group (MAG)** does incredible work here. In Laos alone, their teams have cleared over 100 million square meters of land since 1994 and destroyed more than 314,000 unexploded duds to enable the population to live safely again.



Earth oven, Cha Ho, Phaxay District, Xieng Khouang

But what touched us most deeply in our hearts is the indomitable will of the Lao people to survive. In the villages, people collect the aluminium remnants, melt them down in simple, self-built earth ovens, and cast them into spoons, bracelets, and jewellery. From the lethal war scrap, symbols of peace are created that are sold at night markets and offer families a way out of poverty.

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Aluminium spoons, Cha Ho



Aluminium Products, Cha Ho



Wooden Mold for melting, Cha Ho

Former US President Barack Obama once fittingly said:

"Given our history here, I believe the United States has a moral obligation to help Laos heal."

We hope this story leaves you just as reflective, yet hopeful as it does us.

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