

No 1: April 2007

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MAG Lao to eat more veg

Vegetation cutter expected to increase efficiency by at least 100%



Ugly but effective: the Uni-disk can fell trees and quickly cut through scrub

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All photos: Sean Sutton / MAG
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The Uni-disk – a 40 tonne vegetation removal machine on loan from the US Government – has started trials in Lang Khan, Khammouane. MAG staff were trained to operate and maintain it by three instructors sent from the US, who were extremely impressed with both the MAG team and the EC funded project in Lang Khan generally.

The Uni-disk is expected to improve productivity by enabling much faster clearance of vegetation prior to using metal detectors. It consists of an armoured Caterpillar Excavator, fitted with a one metre wide forestry cutter. The cutter has a dedicated 460 horsepower hydraulic power unit, enabling it to clear bushes, cut through bamboo and fell trees. Please contact MAG Lao if your garden is looking overgrown...

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From the CPM's desk

by Jo Durham, Country Programme Manager

I am pleased to send you the first edition of the new MAG Lao newsletter. We want our partner and colleague organisations to be kept up to date with our activities, and will send it out by email every three months.

We hope to make future editions in both Lao and English and regret that this has not been possible this time.

In 2007 we look forward to consolidating the programme after a period of rapid expansion last year, which saw us go from five to eleven clearance teams! Nonetheless there is still much to be done and we look forward to another busy year, which will include:

- A new project due to start later in the year in Khammouane, in partnership with World Vision and funded by the Australian Government

- Supporting the NRA with our new adviser to the NRA Mine Risk Education (Community Awareness) Officer - see p. 5

- Opening 'UXO Visitor Information Centres' in Phonsavan and Vientiane. Aimed primarily at tourists, these centres are a response to the strong interest in UXO amongst visitors to Laos. The idea is to inform them, increase visibility for donors and partners and raise funds

- Trialing the Uni-disk on loan to MAG Lao from the US Government – see cover story

This newsletter is intended to provide a brief update about our work - but if there is anything in this issue you would like more information on, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me.

A word in your ear

Interview with Lamphane Vannachack, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer

'M&E can answer the questions 'To what extent did we achieve our goals? How can we improve?'

I have just started this job after working for a year as Project Translator/Admin Assistant. M&E Officer is a new position within MAG Lao – in the past we would periodically hire consultants. For now we are focusing on internal systems. We are using a matrix as a tool to evaluate progress and results against our objectives.

M&E is important because we need to be able to check if our staff and systems are working properly or not. The aim of MAG's work is to clear land so that communities can live in safety and increase their agricultural production - we need to meet our targets if we are to achieve that. In the future all our staff will integrate M&E into their work, starting with support service staff then the operations staff. The systems



monitoring will enhance and compliment existing monitoring and quality assurance processes used in MAG's operations.'

MAG Lao in the news

MAG Lao continues to actively seek media coverage that generates exposure for the donors who fund us. Recent press coverage has included articles in the Lao media, Bangkok Post, The Nation, Science Magazine, with more due soon.

An Australian documentary film about MAG's support to UXO Lao, highlighting the partnership between two MAG staff – Technical Adviser Laith Stevens and translator Linthong Syphavong - will be shown at the 2007 Sydney film festival and will be aired on Australian television sometime in the second half of the year. MAG Lao will hold a screening in Vientiane as soon as we have a copy.



Laith and Lin (copyright Lemur Films; Photographer Tom Greenwood)

Two journalists working for the organisation Landmine Action visited Xieng Khouang, and at the request of the NRA, the MAG Xieng Khouang team provided them with information and invaluable logistics support.

MAG Lao will feature in a forthcoming documentary about elephants in Laos due to be screened on the Wildlife Channel. On occasion, MAG has used elephants to move big bombs (after removing the fuses!).

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Project updates: Khammouane

Project: The Partnership for Safe Educational Opportunities
Location: Boualapha, Mahaxay and Ngommalat districts

February was the first month of operations for this project, following two months of recruitment, training and other preparations. The teams made an impressive start, clearing almost 100,000 square metres (10 hectares) against a planned 60,000. The reason is mainly due to adapting the way metal detectors are used – for UXO clearance rather than mine detection.

'To maximise productivity but at the same time maintain high safety standards, I'm hoping to get some healthy rivalry going between the female team and the other teams,' says Team Field Manager Jim Vernon.

One innovation in the project is that the clearance teams are living amongst the communities they are working in, instead of returning to a MAG camp each night. They are introduced to the villagers by the Community Liaison teams, who have usually lived in the village for about 10 days beforehand as part of the CL process. This new arrangement increases ownership of the clearance process.

In March we were pleased to host a visit from the President of the Humpty Dumpty Institute, Mr Ralph L. Cwerman.



Villagers of Ban Hai, an HDI target village, with UXO. They cut through this bomblet dispenser whilst working, but by chance it did not explode



Project: Integrated UXO Clearance for sustainable outcomes in Khammouane
Location: Mahaxay district

As with the HDI project, operations have just commenced. Using our revised methodologies, 60,000 square metres were cleared during February – three times the target. Land cleared so far includes that earmarked by our development partner Triangle for irrigation ditches, electrical power lines, schools and agricultural land. This kind of targeted UXO clearance is designed to maximise impact for communities by enabling increased agricultural production and the development of basic services. The teams are now in a position to provide further support to MAG's other development partner in the province – WFP.



Year round access to Ban Napao was made possible through collaboration with our development partner: clearance by MAG, access road and bridge by WFP



Project: Humanitarian UXO clearance in Khammouane Province
Location: Lang Khan Development Zone, Boualapha district

Apart from the deployment of the Uni-disk, operations in Khammouane are continuing to progress well with teams delivering excellent results - in March for example the teams averaged 113.5 square metres per detector per day, compared with less than 50 in 2006.



Female team leader Vilaphanh marks a clearance site.



Project: Demining and Community Development,
Location: Nong Het district, Xieng Khouang

Two villages were recently cleared for our development partner in Nong Het, the Lao Red Cross. 64 toilets - one per household - have been installed as a result, improving sanitation for the community members. Current work focuses on clearing 50,000 square metres of land that will be used for agriculture.



Community members were able to construct their own toilets following UXO clearance



Project: Village Assisted Clearance
Location: Ban Houay Dok Kham, Kham District, Xieng Khouang

37,000 square metres were cleared in February, under the leadership of Mrs Pheng Souvanthou, 25. Pheng was acting team leader at the time but is now team leader of the all-female clearance team (currently working on the Plain of Jars project).

US Congresswoman Betty Cullum visited Xieng Khouang in late 2006 and visited this project.



Pheng, team leader of MAG's all-female clearance team in Xieng Khouang



Project: UXO clearance, pro-poor tourism and sustainable management
Location: Plain of Jars, Xieng Khouang

A workshop in early February kicked off the project. Clearance began at Ban Pakeo (Pek district), a stunning site with more than 400 jars. The site is also impressive because some of the jars have lids which are not seen elsewhere. Following training in the ARCHAEO-UXO clearance methodology, developed by MAG in order not to damage the jars, the all-female clearance team worked on this site. It was a testing first task - all the equipment for clearance (and other items such as tents, food and water) had to be carried by hand on a walk of 3-4 hours to reach the site.



Clearing the Jars sites will benefit communities by boosting tourism



Project: Support to UXO Lao Operations
Location: Houaphanh

Since becoming an independent operator in 2004, MAG Lao has continued to support UXO LAO, firstly in the south and (since August last year) in Houaphanh. Technical Adviser Laith Stevens is back at work following operations on two dislocated shoulders. During the next quarter Laith will be gradually introducing new work methodologies and equipment, such as trialing the new Vallon VMXC1 detectors and providing enhanced technical survey training. A magnetometer, on loan from MAG, will also be tested – this is a device that measures irregularities in the earth's magnetic field. 'These irregularities are created by metal objects in the soil, such as UXO. The device will enable us to quickly scan an area before using metal detectors. This will focus our effort on removing UXO instead of metal fragments and therefore speed up the whole clearance process,' says Laith.



The magnetometer was bought with funds provided by Japanese foundation ISC



Remember these faces

New people, new roles

All photos: MAG Lao



Subhani Gatemurutha has taken up the position of International Finance Manager, having performed the same job in MAG Sri Lanka



Eddie Chalmers is our new Technical Operations Manager (TOM), who most recently worked for MAG in Sri Lanka

Willi Kubirske joined us in January as Technical Field Manager in Xieng Khouang. Willi, from Namibia, previously worked for MAG in Angola and Sri Lanka



Lamphane Vannachack has been promoted to Monitoring and Evaluation Officer. Previously he was Admin Assistant / project translator



Ruth Bottomley is MRE Adviser to the NRA, having worked in a similar position in Cambodia



Channaly Manichanh is the Project Coordinator for the Humpty Dumpty Institute



Pheng Souvanthon has been promoted to Team Leader of the all-female clearance team in Xieng Khouang



Viengkham Chittapong has been made Human Resources Officer after three years working as Admin Officer



Sivilay Syphavong has been promoted from field assistant to Office Manager in Khammouane

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