

Quarterly news roundup:

MoUs have been signed between MAG and the NRA for the continuation of three projects in Khammouane. Two existing donors are continuing their support (Humpty Dumpty Institute / US Department of Agriculture, and the US Department of State) and are being joined by AusAID, a new donor for MAG.

Five UXO Lao staff have been given free places on a training course for Trauma Care Medics being given by MAG with support from Global Medic.

CEIA, manufacturer of many of the metal detectors used by MAG, is currently training MAG staff in maintenance and repair procedures. One member of staff will receive advanced training in Italy.

Bomb Harvest, the Australian documentary featuring MAG Lao, will be screened at five international film festivals over the coming months, including the Artist Film Festival in Los Angeles and the Berlin One World Human Rights Film Festival.

Lou McGrath OBE, MAG's Chief Executive, visited the programme in June. Lou met with central and provincial government staff, visited field operations in Khammouane, and gave a talk about employing more women.



Getting 'Laoder'

MAG Lao PDR reducing number of international staff

Photo: Roger Arnold

Various new positions have been created for national staff over recent months as the process of nationalising the programme continues.

Many Lao staff have seen their level of responsibility increase as tasks that were once undertaken by foreign experts have been transferred.

Day to day operations at provincial level are currently managed entirely by national staff. There is now just one Technical Field Manager (TFM), instead of three this time last year. The TFM's job is to support the technical development of the operations manager rather than conduct the work himself.

Similarly, the Community Liaison (CL) teams will soon report to a national instead of international staff member. The new CL Coordinator will be trained by an expatriate for 12 months, after which support will only be provided as necessary.

David Hayter, Country Programme Manager, said that MAG was committed to transferring responsibility to national staff.

'We are very proud that many of our Lao staff have moved into positions of greater responsibility over recent months. Training and capacity building has always been a priority for MAG and this is now paying off. I have complete confidence that our Lao staff are ready to step up to their new tasks,' he said.

MAG Lao's work is made possible through the generous support of the following donors:



Project highlights:

Support to UXO Lao Operations Houaphanh Province



Houaphanh is one of the provinces where Enhanced Technical Survey (ETS) has been used for the last nine months, so the MAG Technical Adviser was able to provide useful input at the recent Technical Working Group meeting in Savannakhet. Other capacity building activities are ongoing, such as weekly technical training, quizzes and regular problem solving sessions in the field.

Female EOD Clearance Team Xieng Khouang



DFID have funded this team since May 2008. The All-Female team has so far worked in a total of 15 rural communities, mainly in Nong Het district. They have cleared more than 233,000m² of land, including 32,217m² cleared in the historic Plain of Jars sites.

Integrated UXO Clearance for sustainable outcomes in Khammouane Mahaxay district



The team funded by the US Department of State continues to clear land for school grounds, irrigation channels and electricity lines. We are providing clearance for Triangle and the Lao Red Cross as necessary. To date, almost 48,000m² of land has been cleared, benefiting over 15,000 community members.

Mine Risk Education Support provided to the National Regulatory Authority MRE team



Two training sessions on the new MRE materials were carried out. A framework is now being developed to monitor the use and effectiveness of the materials. Key principles for MRE were approved by the MRE Technical Working Group Members and the NRA and distributed. The unit has produced UXO risk education radio fillers for a training handbook for youth DJs, supported by the Children's Cultural Centre and UNICEF. Recommendations from the UXO Sector Review are currently being examined.

UXO action for sustainable community development (programme-wide funding)



Flexible DFID funding is used to support MAG's seven clearance teams wherever necessary. Most recently the All-Female Team in Xieng Khouang and the 'Partnership for Safe Educational Opportunities' projects have used DFID money to cover funding gaps.

Support to UXO Lao Operations Champassak and Savannakhet



(Funded by the Department of State through Armor Group)

The MAG Technical Adviser started working in the field in July. The first task was a needs assessment, to establish benchmarks and priorities for capacity building. From this, a six month training plan was developed, and technical and management training has now commenced. Various other tasks have been undertaken, for example changes to the explosives storage system in Savannakhet.

Scrap metal foundry UXO clearance and EOD project Xieng Khouang



Working alongside employees of scrap yards, MAG has so far identified and categorised about 25,000 items of UXO. Safe storage areas for UXO items have been constructed and demolition of the items will start shortly. Community Liaison teams have held 64 MRE sessions with 143 scrap yard staff. Systems to report items of UXO in scrap yards and villages are being initiated.

Reducing the burden of UXO in vulnerable communities Khammouane



Since AusAID began funding two clearance teams in April 2008, the project has focused on clearing land for infrastructure development. MAG has cleared land in order that the World Food Programme can safely construct roads, bridges and irrigation canals. Since April 2008 the project has benefited over 1,600 beneficiaries in 18 communities.

The partnership for Safe Education Opportunities Khammouane



MAG has continued to support HDI by clearing UXO that prevents the poorest children from attending school. 11 school grounds have been cleared since January 2008, bringing total clearance under the project to 279,535m². As well as clearing playgrounds, access paths to schools and school gardens, the project has increased the amount of safe land available for parents to farm. If children are not required to spend time looking for food in the forest, they are more likely to attend school.

A word in your ear

Interview with Soth Phommalin, Provincial Programme Manager, Xieng Khouang

“My job is to look after everything that MAG does in the province, ensure that we make effective and efficient use of donor resources and that our work contributes to poverty alleviation.

I worked as the office manager for several years and was promoted last year. I am happy that MAG has given me this opportunity. It is a challenge and I have learnt a lot. Now I have more authority to make decisions, based on MAG policy

and the requirements of the government and donors. I now make some decisions that used to be taken by the Technical Field Manager [an international staff member], for instance regarding deployment of teams and logistics issues.

I believe that Lao people can do a good job. We need to have ownership of UXO clearance. I always tell my staff that whilst we are employed by MAG, we are actually working to benefit Lao communities.”



Photo: Nick Axelrod / MAG

Over 1000 bombies found on school land

....and still counting

The DFID-funded team in Xieng Khouang are currently clearing their most heavily contaminated school yet.

So far, 1039 bomblets from cluster bombs (known locally as ‘bombies’) have been found, along with 69 other items of UXO, in an area of forest belonging to Pakea Neua village primary school.

The clearance work is not yet complete. About 7, 500 square metres have so far been cleared, with about 2000 remaining.

Pakea Neua village is unusual; a beautiful area of forest in the centre of the village, right next to the school, has been protected.



Photo: MAG Lao PDR

UXO litters the forest

The forest is quiet and shady, an ideal place for children to play. However, the village was the site of a Vietnamese army camp during the war and was heavily bombed. “Our teacher told us not to go into the forest because of the UXO,” says

nine-year old Dit, a student at the school. Some children ignored their teacher and did enter the forest to collect insects. Fortunately, none of them were involved in a UXO accident, although Dit says that her 14 year old cousin was injured elsewhere in the village. “He was walking next to a cow and it stepped on a bombie. His stomach and shoulder were injured,” she says.

MAG has already cleared the school playground. Just under the surface the team found the head of a missile, three bombies and a rocket. “We want to go into the forest to play chase,” says Dit. It won’t be long before she can.