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U.S. to Hike Aid To Remove Laos Bombs

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Three decades after the end of the Vietnam War, the United States is increasing aid to help remove unexploded ordnance that continues to kill people in the former war zone, especially in Laos where 2 million tons of bombs were dropped.

During the war, the United States bombed Laos relentlessly for a decade in an effort to cut off North Vietnamese supply lines. Though the war ended 30 years ago, the carnage from those bombings continues.

Nearly a third of the bombs failed to explode, lying in wait as "de facto anti-personnel mines," according to a Human Rights Watch report. The bombs have killed roughly 6,000 Laotians since the end of fighting.

"Every time I go to Laos I meet fresh bomb victims who have lost an eye or a leg or two," said Jim Harris, a retired Wisconsin school principal who helps educate people about the experience of Laotian refugees in his state.

U.S. pilots dropped 2 million tons of bombs on Laos from 1964-1973, double the amount dropped on Germany in World War II.

The United States has agreed to nearly double the amount of aid it provides to help remove those bombs, known as unexploded ordnance, or UXO. Congress approved \$2.5 million for bomb removal in Laos next year, up from \$1.4 million, as part of a move to normalize trade relations with the impoverished Southeast Asian country.

But the improvement in trade relations and even the increased funding for bomb removal were opposed by some critics who said Laos continues to persecute its Hmong minority that fought alongside the CIA during the Vietnam War.

"Why should the U.S. taxpayer pay to remove land mines and unexploded ordnance from the Vietnam War, when the Lao government and military are involved in military operations against the Hmong people?" asked Philip Smith, the Washington director of Lao Veterans of America.

But Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., said the United States "has a moral obligation to partner with the people of Laos to help eliminate the ordnance and put the land back into productive use for this impoverished nation."

Many of the Hmong people who fled Laos settled in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

While the Laotian government is in charge of bomb removal, it relies on help from other countries and outside groups to help pay for it. The Laotian bomb removal agency, UXO Lao, hit a crisis point a couple of years ago.

"Money wasn't coming in in sufficient numbers, and UXO Lao had to let go of half of its employees," said Douglas Hartwick, the U.S. ambassador to Laos from 2001 until last July. "So there was a big push on the part of donors, and

the Lao government to put together a long-term coherent strategy, to clean up the unexploded bombs."

The agency's annual budget is around \$4 million, according to its Web site. Officials with UXO Lao did not respond to e-mails seeking comment.

Hartwick said the explosives removal process, using metal detectors, is painstakingly slow. "You're getting constant hits with a metal detector," said Hartwick. "You've got shrapnel like you wouldn't believe, plus bullets, mortars and grenades."

The Mine Advisory Group, a non-governmental organization in Great Britain that helps destroy land mines and unexploded ordnance worldwide, is one of several private groups that receive U.S. money for work in Laos. Sean Sutton, the group's spokesman, said "it's welcome news that the United States is doing more to help."

During a visit to Laos in October, he said, seven people were killed when a man hit a bomb while chopping wood. Just a few days later, he said, two boys were killed when playing with tennis-ball-sized cluster bomblets.

He said many of the injuries and fatalities occur when poor Laotians are attracted to the explosives in search of scrap metal. They can get \$1 for seven pounds of steel or about two pounds of aluminum.

"For a typical family making \$400 a year farming, a dollar is worth an awful lot," said Sutton.