

Laos: Why the World's Most Bombed Country May Still Suffer From These Wounds After a Hundred Years

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Laos is a country in Southeast Asia with a rich development potential based on vast water resources as well as minerals including gold. Its suitably located land trade routes had also contributed to the prosperity of the country in previous centuries. In more recent time its tourism potential has attracted much attention and the country even received the most favored tourist destination status from a leading European tourism organization, partly due to architecture, history and heritage aspects. In numerous villages of this rural-based economy there has been much potential for achieving food reliance in ecologically conducive ways.

Unfortunately all this potential was first harmed by the highly exploitative French colonial rule, then Japanese invaders, and then French colonialists again. The brave people of Laos continued to resist all this to finally achieve independence. Tragically, before they could properly tap the potential of various development opportunities, they were attacked in the most destructive ways by the USA Air Force as well as the CIA.

No, the people and the country of Laos had not harmed the far away located, mighty USA in any way at all. Despite this, the people of Laos faced their heaviest destruction from the USA, worse than what they faced even during direct colonial rule, due to two factors.

First, in the course of their freedom movement, it is the communist force called the Pathet Lao which had emerged as the strongest, probably because it was the closest to protecting the interests of peasants and workers. Hence it could only be expected to be friendly to the communists in their neighboring country of Vietnam, particularly as the Vietnam communists were led by such a great and popular leader as **Ho Chi Minh**. To start with neither the communists of Vietnam nor of Laos had any quarrel with the USA at all and in fact expected it to help them in their anti-colonial struggles.

However the USA establishment had by then taken a non-rational decision of coming down hard upon any and all communist forces and led by such thinking they got involved in a long and prolonged war first in Vietnam and then in Laos. In the case of Laos a more specific complaint of the USA was that some land routes of Laos were being used to supply provisions to the communists in Vietnam and these had to be cut off.

Anyway, the USA embarked on a twin strategy of very heavy aerial bombing of Laos, including its villages, and at the same time using the CIA to organize an illegal and secret land war on the land. The CIA organized war was largely kept secret from not just the world but even from the people and elected representatives of the USA for a long time. This illegal war initially also used the cover of development aid agencies to make contacts. Then ethnicity based groups which could be used to fight the communists were carefully identified and helped with money and arms to attack the communist forces and their supporters. This created such great divisions in the country that it became very difficult for certain people to live together in the same country again, as some of them were looked upon as traitors, and several of them had to be settled in the USA.

However even worse damage was done by bombing attacks, because of the very destructive weapons used as well as the extremely large scale of the bombings. **Between 1964 and 1973, about 2.3 million tons of bombs were dropped in this small country, more than the 2.1 million tons dropped by the USA in Europe as well as in Asia together in the entire course of World War II.** In terms of bombing relative to population or per capita bombing, no other country in the world has ever suffered heavier bombing than this. Over a period of about 9 years, one bombing was carried out every 8 minutes (day as well as night).

Nearly 270 million bombs, mostly cluster bombs, were dropped. Cluster bombs are known to be one of the most painful weapons. A single cluster bomb, which in turn can contain as many as 200 bomblets, explodes a little before hitting ground and the bomblets can be very violently dispersed, often getting lodged in critical organs of the person or child who has been hit, or resulting in several festering open wounds whose pain has been compared to acid burning. Completely innocent civilians and villagers were hit more often. It became impossible to live in several villages and these were deserted and people became refugees. In a small country nearly 200,000 persons died, nearly double this number were seriously injured, nearly 7,50,000 became refugees.

This was not all. About 30 per cent of the dropped bombs did not detonate immediately and remained hidden in various places to pose serious danger in future. Nearly 50,000 persons including a very large number of children have been killed, seriously injured and disabled in later years due to these hidden bombs. Many such injuries resulted in amputations. As several bombs resembled balls or toys for children, a large number of children were injured or died when they picked up bombs, despite the fact that a campaign of warning was launched.

This danger of unexploded ordnance (UXO) is likely to continue for long, with 63 such accidents being reported as late as 2021, because the USA has invested so little in removing this danger. According to one estimate, while the USA spent \$16 million per DAY on the bombings for 9 years (on the basis of current prices), it has spent only average of \$ 5 million per YEAR since it started contributing, that too very late, to the UXO clearing work in the 1990s. This contribution was increased after some time not so much by the USA government acting on its own, but because of the wide awareness generated by some good

efforts like the Legacies of War project which increased public awareness of this great injustice and tragedy. A very small percentage of the estimated UXO has been cleared yet, probably less than 5 per cent. It has been estimated in US studies that the UXO risks can continue beyond 100 years.

It is important not only for the USA to contribute much more for UXO clearance but also to pay huge compensation to Laos because the bombings and the CIA land war in Laos were completely illegal.

The USA war against Laos was for the USA just an extension of its war with Vietnam; it had no legal justification and was shockingly unethical in all aspects. The only reason, if it can be called a reason, the USA had was that it was committed to curbing any communist force, and isn't it an irony that after all that happened, the tiny country of Laos with its 8 million people is today more committed to communism than China is!

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