



Religions for Peace 

Cluster Munitions in Lao PDR

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES



For more than 40 years, cluster munitions have killed and wounded innocent people, causing untold suffering, loss and hardship for thousands in more than 20 countries throughout the world. These weapons cause death and injury to civilians during attacks and for years afterwards because of their lethal contamination. Cluster munitions hamper post-conflict rebuilding and rehabilitation and the dangerous work of cluster munition clearance absorbs funds that could be spent on other urgent humanitarian needs.

In December 2008, governments met in Oslo, Norway, to sign an international treaty—the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM). This agreement bans cluster munitions and obliges states to clear contaminated land and provide assistance to survivors and affected communities.

BANNING CLUSTER MUNITIONS

Statement of the *Religions for Peace* Executive Committee—May 2008

We, the *Religions for Peace* Executive Committee, call for the involvement of the entire *Religions for Peace* network in the global campaign to bring about a comprehensive ban on cluster munitions. We encourage all members of the *Religions for Peace* World Council and other leadership bodies to be advocates on this important issue. We urge all governments to become formal Party to the treaty that will be negotiated in Dublin, Ireland, in May 2008, as a way of taking concrete action for the protection of the vulnerable and the promotion of peace.

Religions for Peace has had a deep commitment from its founding to work for nuclear disarmament. Related concerns about peaceful co-existence and prevention of violent conflicts have compelled *Religions for Peace* to adopt a wider disarmament agenda. As part of this effort, *Religions for Peace* is joining with the worldwide “Cluster Munitions Coalition” in calling for the end of the production, transfer, stockpiling, and use of cluster munitions.

For more than 40 years, cluster munitions have killed and wounded innocent people—most frequently children—causing untold suffering, loss and hardship for thousands in more than 20 countries. These weapons cause death and injury to civilians during attacks and for years afterwards. The lingering threat of unexploded cluster bombs hampers post-conflict rebuilding and rehabilitation and the dangerous work of clearance absorbs funds that could be spent on other urgent humanitarian needs. Without determined action, the civilian harm caused by these weapons both during and after conflict will continue to grow.

Our faith traditions call us to stand with those who have suffered and to work together for the well-being of the human family based on our shared commitment to respect, justice, and peace.

CONTENTS

The Role of Religion	3
What are Cluster Munitions?	3
Quick Facts	3
The Convention on Cluster Munitions	3
The Response from Civil Society	4
Cluster Munitions in Lao	5
Effects	5
Promoting the Convention.....	5
Implementing the Convention in Lao	5
Survivor Assistance.....	6
Actions to Take.....	6
Acknowledgements.....	8

The Role of Religion

The dignity and value of life as well as the human sufferings brought about by cluster munitions make it morally and ethically imperative to ensure the successful implementation of the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM).

Religious leaders, and their respective communities, can act as channels of communication, helping to educate people about the dangers of these weapons and prevent future casualties, as well as contribute to the universalization of the treaty. These leaders and communities have particular cultural understandings, infrastructures, and resources that can unleash urgent common action. By emphasizing their moral authority, these communities can thus be instrumental in confronting violence, presenting alternatives to conflict, and urging reconciliation, peaceful co-existence, and humanity.

Religions for Peace offers a special multi-religious platform for engagement and leadership that reaches across borders and can inspire new partnerships for positive action. *Religions for Peace* joined the Cluster Munition Coalition (CMC) in 2008, a global network of nearly 200 civil society organisations, including NGOs, faith-based groups, and professional associations.

What are Cluster Munitions?

Cluster munitions are large weapons containing dozens to hundreds of smaller submunitions, often called bombs, within a larger container. They are dropped from the air or fired from the ground, at which point the container opens in the air and scatters the bombs over a wide area—sometimes the size of 2-4 football fields. This impact is referred to as a “footprint” and this is why cluster munitions are considered to be wide area-effect weapons.

As so many of the submunitions fail to work properly, huge quantities are left on the ground and, like landmines, remain a fatal threat to anyone in the area long after a conflict ends. Unexploded submunitions can detonate when people hit them with a tool while farming, or by inquisitive children attracted by their bright colours, or simply from someone stepping on them. The presence of such unexploded submunitions threatens life and limb, hampers provision of relief, and impedes development for years after a conflict.

Cluster munitions were first used in World War II by German and Soviet forces. During the 1970s, the United States used massive quantities of the weapon in Cambodia, Lao, and Vietnam. More recently, cluster munitions were used extensively in the Gulf Wars, Chechnya, the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon. Cluster munitions have also been used in a number of conflicts in Africa.

Quick Facts

- One cluster munition contains enough submunitions or “bombs” to cover an area the size of 2-4 football fields.
- Cluster munitions have been used in at least 30 countries and areas.
- 34 countries are known to have produced over 210 different types of air-dropped and surface-launched cluster munitions.
- At least 13 countries have transferred over 50 types of cluster munitions to at least 60 other countries.
- Billions of cluster munition are currently stockpiled by some 78 countries worldwide and around half of these countries have now agreed to destroy them.
- Tens of thousands of civilians worldwide have been killed or injured by cluster munitions.
- On average, 25% of civilian casualties are children. In some areas, more than 50% of survivors are children. The small size and curious shapes of the munition dispersed by cluster munitions make them particularly interesting to young people.

The Convention on Cluster Munitions

The Convention on Cluster Munitions is the international agreement that bans cluster munitions and obligates states to provide assistance to cluster munitions victims. It is an extremely comprehensive international instrument for ridding the world of this weapon and deals with everything from use, production and trade, to survivor assistance, clearance, and stockpile destruction. It was signed by 104 governments when it opened for signature at an official ceremony in December 2008.

State Parties of the CCM are obligated to:

- **Never use** cluster munitions, nor to “develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile, retain or transfer them”—directly or indirectly;
- **Destroy clusters in their stockpiles** within eight years of the treaty becoming binding;
- **Clear clusters** in their territory within 10 years of becoming a State Party;
- In affected countries, **ensure that survivors receive the support they need** to recover and reclaim their place in their communities;
- **Offer assistance** to other State Parties, for example providing assistance for survivors and for clearance programmes;
- **Adopt national implementation measures** (such as national legislation) in order to ensure that the terms of the treaty are upheld in their territory.

The Response from Civil Society

The Cluster Munition Coalition is an international civil society campaign working to eradicate cluster munitions, prevent further casualties from these weapons, and put an end for all time to the suffering they cause. The Coalition works through its members to change the policy and practice of governments and organisations towards these aims and raise awareness of the problem amongst the public.

Around 350 CMC member organisations in 90 countries work on disarmament, peace and security, human rights, victim/survivor assistance, clearance, women’s rights, faith issues and other related issues. It is important to note that survivors of cluster munitions accidents have played a strong and leading role in the CMC. They have advocated with governments and also gave direct input to the language in the Convention concerning victim assistance.

The Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor is a civil society-based program providing research and monitoring on progress made in eliminating landmines, cluster munitions, and other explosive remnants of war. It is renowned for its independent and impartial monitoring and has become the *de facto* monitoring regime for the Mine Ban Treaty, a role it

THE LEGACY OF THE MINE BAN TREATY

The Mine Ban Treaty represents the first time in history that a widely used weapon was banned because of its horrific and indiscriminate impact on civilian lives. This treaty was propelled by a coalition of non-governmental organizations working with a few key governments—not unlike the momentum that led to the Oslo process to ban cluster munitions. In the process to negotiate this new treaty that bans a similarly indiscriminate weapon, governments were able to learn from the legacy of the Mine Ban Treaty and years of implementation challenges and successes.

One of these challenges involves obligations for clearance, which can be costly and time consuming and places the burden on the affected state. In the CCM, States Party that have used cluster munitions in the past on the territory of another State Party are “strongly encouraged” to provide assistance to help clear and destroy cluster munitions including provision of technical data on the location and nature of the cluster munitions’ strikes. This is a new and very important development brought about by the difficulties, often financial, that affected countries have faced in clearing mined areas they were not responsible for originally contaminating.

Most significantly however, the CCM includes new and important obligations to protect and promote the human rights of cluster munitions survivors and to ensure they receive the different kinds of assistance they need in order to be able to live full and active lives. By using stronger and more thorough language than that contained in the Mine Ban Treaty, the CCM significantly raises the standard for survivor assistance in a very multi-dimensional way. It includes a reference to the consideration of age, gender, and vulnerable groups in providing assistance, as well as an obligation for states to consult and involve survivors and their representative organizations when implementing survivor assistance policies and practices.

is now undertaking for the Convention on Cluster Munitions as well.

Cluster Munitions in Lao

Lao is widely considered to be the most heavily bombed country in history. During Vietnam-era bombings, the United States launched more than 500,000 bombing missions in Lao, with two million tons of ordnance being dropped. Most of the bombings were cluster munitions, bombs filled with anti-personnel cluster bomblets, intended to be released in mid-air to cover a large area and explode on contact. The sheer volume of bombings by the United States between 1964 and 1973—equating a planeload of bombs being dropped every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for 9 years—had a devastating impact on the people of Lao.

The horrors caused by these bombs continue to reverberate in Lao today, not only due to past memories of the bombing era, but because they continue to pose a real and significant threat to the livelihoods of the people of Lao. It is estimated that 10% to 30% of the bomblets dropped on Lao by the United States did not explode on impact, resulting in Lao being littered with large quantities of unexploded ordnance (UXO), including cluster bombs. Today, there are as many as 86 million unexploded cluster bomblets spread out across Lao, and since the war, only a fraction of these have been removed or destroyed. For instance, between 1996 and 2008, there were an estimated 387,645 UXOs destroyed, only 0.49% of all UXOs scattered throughout Lao.

Today, there remain vast quantities of UXOs lying dormant on the grounds of Lao, waiting to be detonated by any passerby. As a result, an estimated 300 people are killed every year by UXOs in Lao. This number has been steady since the early 1990's, and since the end of the war, there has been an estimated 34,000 casualties due to UXOs.

Effects

The unexploded ordnance scattered throughout Lao has had a negative effect on the economic and human development in Lao. The injuries and deaths caused by the UXOs have hampered food production and the building of infrastructure and have victimized individuals and communities, preventing them from productively contributing to the development of their country. People are any nation's greatest resource. These weapons prevent them from being able to contribute as they otherwise would.

For instance, it is estimated that UXOs contaminate about 50% of arable land in Lao and that farmers and related occupations represent half of all UXO casualties. This, in turn, has made the production of food more costly in Lao and has prevented citizens from using available land for food production. With farmers making up half of all UXO deaths and 84% of total casualties being males (the highest rates being for boys 6-15, then young males 16-21), Lao continues to lose members of society who play an important role in its development. This, along with a substantial amount of money spent by the Lao government on victim assistance and UXO clearance (figure), rather than on other development initiatives, has prevented Lao from making significant strides on eradicating poverty and ensuring a healthier life for Lao citizens.

Promoting the Convention

The government of Lao has been a powerful proponent for the Convention on Cluster Munitions. Not only were they among the first 30 countries to ratify the Convention, helping to bring it into force in just one year, but they are also the host of the First Meeting of States Parties to the Convention taking place in November 2010.

Implementing the Convention in Lao

The National Regulatory Authority for UXO/Mine Action is a public institution of the Government of the Lao PDR. It is responsible for the coordination of all operators in the country working on the impact of unexploded bombs, artillery shells, grenades, landmines, and like ordnance. The overarching aim of the NRA is to enable all people of Lao to live free from the impact of unexploded ordnance.

Its responsibilities include:

- The establishment of national standards detailing the minimum standards and requirements for all UXO/mine action conducted in Laos, including the accreditation of UXO/mine action organizations, the planning for UXO/mine action tasks, the handover of released land, quality management requirements, the training and qualification of UXO/mine action personnel, and environmental considerations.

- Information management
- Victim assistance
- Mine risk education
- Clearance

Survivor Assistance

In the Convention, the word victim is defined to include “those who have suffered physical or psychological injury, economic loss, social marginalization or substantial impairments of their fundamental rights; including those directly impacted by the weapon as well as their affected families and communities.”

As already noted, one important obligation of the Convention is that states ensure that accident survivors receive the support they need to recover and reclaim their place in their communities. This can include:

- The establishment and enhancement of accessible, quality health-care services for victims and the maintenance of facilities with the proper equipment, supplies, and medicines.
- Offering physical rehabilitation services for all UXO victims and providing the necessary assistive devices, including prosthetics, wheel chairs, crutches, or any other tools required for the victim to reclaim personal mobility.
- The development of capacities to address the psychological and psychosocial needs of the victims of UXOs.
- The socio-economic inclusion of UXO victims, including providing education vocational training and employment opportunities for all those who have suffered due to UXOs.

Ensuring that national legal and policy frameworks effectively address the needs and fundamental human rights of victims of UXOs, and the establishment of legislation and policies assuring effective rehabilitation and socio-economic reintegration services as well as freedom from any form of discrimination based on disability or other grounds

Religion and religious leaders have much to offer in the holistic healing process and social reintegration, transforming victims into survivors.

It is important that the impact of such an accident is understood as more than just physical. There are mental, emotional and social aspects that are just as painful. Many survivors, particularly women, speak of being excluded by their societies and even families after the accident. Considered a burden, they are frequently denied access to health care, education, and employment.

The same networks that allow for education and awareness building can also work together to provide care for survivors of cluster munitions accidents and affected communities.

Cluster munition survivors struggle to achieve social acceptance, gain meaningful employment, and ensure their rights are respected. Survivors and other people with disabilities are among the most impoverished groups in every society. Few have access to quality health care, rehabilitation therapy, or prosthetics.

The faith community and place of worship is often a centerpiece in societies and an ideal place to develop programs and actions that give support to survivors. Helping people with disabilities to claim their rights and become active citizens is one of the most powerful ways that religious leaders and communities can improve the lives of survivors around the world.

Actions to Take

- Offer counseling and refuge. Faith communities offer hope and comfort and can offer the spiritual guidance and strength for survivors to heal. Extend this to the families of survivors.
- Teach by example. Religious leaders have a great ability to influence behaviour change through their teachings, values, and practices. In a place where survivors are shunned for their disability, ensuring that they are included in the community is a unique offering for survivors, and can lead to a deeper change in how the community treats survivors. Frame this not as a matter of charity, but rather as a recognition of rights.

- Ensure that places of worship and faith-based hospitals, clinics, educational institutions are all fully accessible with ramps, wide doorways, etc.
- Assist survivors and communities in finding new means of employment, livelihood, and/or relevant training.
- Fundraise for or innovate new programs to provide prostheses. An amputee's first artificial limb is transitional and may not fit properly within months, or will need eventual repair and replacement. Thus, the availability of long-term services must be guaranteed for necessary adjustments or replacement.
- When housing projects are built for survivors, see that they are not set apart but instead are part of the community and facilitate full participation in society.
- Work with local hospitals and medical practitioners to ensure that emergency medical care is available and facilities maintained with personnel and supplies. First aid training to respond to traumatic injury and severe bleeding increases the chance of survivors living long enough to receive emergency medical care.
- Create linkages with other faith groups who are in affected regions, and assist their survivor care abilities through fundraising, volunteer projects, and cultural exchanges.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities opened for signature and ratification on Friday, 30 March 2007 at United Nations Headquarters in New York. A record 81 countries and the European Community signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and 44 signed the Convention's Optional Protocol, a mechanism to address individual violations and make country visits. The Disability Rights Convention is hailed as one of the most progressive human rights documents ever created. It defines the equality, inclusion and full participation of people with disabilities in society, and respect for their dignity and autonomy, as universal human rights.

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INSIDE BACK COVER

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