

Why is the United States Still Terrorizing Laos?

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Last month, the United States announced a new aid package of [\\$15 million](#) for the unexploded ordnance (UXO) sector in Laos. The aid package—the highest annual amount the US has ever given for UXO cleanup in Laos—brings to total about \$85 million the US has given to Laos for UXO cleanup since 1993.

This is a shocking and embarrassingly low figure. The UXO is the result of one of the most intensive bombing campaigns in human history, when the United States dropped [two million tons](#) of bombs on Laos from 1964 to 1973. [One third](#) of the bombs did not explode on impact, and have killed or injured [twenty thousand](#) people since 1973.

The United States has a moral responsibility to do everything it can to clean up the UXO and help the victims. The \$85 million the US has allocated to date are mere pennies compared to the [\\$18 million](#) (inflation-adjusted) the US spent bombing Laos *per day* from 1964 to 1973. The best estimated amount to clean up all the UXO is \$16 billion, according to UXO expert Mike Boddington (as quoted in the excellent book by journalists Karen J. Coates and Jerry Redfern, [Eternal Harvest: The Legacy of American Bombs in Laos](#)).

The United States could easily provide the \$16 billion needed to clean up the UXO. For comparison, the US spent [\\$610 billion](#) on the military in 2014 (more than the next seven highest spenders combined), according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. \$16 billion is just 2.6 percent of \$610 billion.

Why does the US government refuse to provide the necessary funds? Clearly, the US could provide the money—if it wanted. And there's the key. The United States simply doesn't care. Some poor, suffering people in a developing country that most Americans wouldn't be able to find on a map just don't matter. The US has more important things to spend its money on, like a trillion dollars on [nuclear arms](#) over the next three decades, a trillion and a half dollars on a [new type of plane](#), almost [5,000 military bases](#) and sites worldwide (587 of them outside the US and its territories), and [arming](#) human rights abusers like Israel.

This is an unacceptable state of affairs. Laos is a beautiful country with warm, friendly people that never did anything to the United States and never threatened the United States. Their only crimes were seeking independence through the communist, nationalist group the Pathet Lao (who had fought the French in the First Indochina War and the US-backed royalist government in Laos in the 1960s and 70s) and to have had the misfortune to share a border with Vietnam, another country the United States sought to decimate.

When I visited Laos last year, the effects of the so-called "Secret War" (secret to Americans, but definitely not to Laotians) were ever present. In Phonsavan, the capital of one of the most bombed regions in Laos, Xieng Khouang, bomb casings abound. The tourist

information center has a substantial amount of them displayed outside its doors.



Bomb casings are even used for practical or decorative purposes. Laotian homes in rural areas use them as stilts as part of the structure for their houses. Restaurants display them outside to attract tourists. For example, a restaurant called “Craters” has these outside its entrance in Phonsavan:



Anyone who goes to Phonsavan should be sure to pay a visit to the UXO Survivor Information Centre. Inside one will find details of how one Laotian NGO, the [Quality of Life Association](#), is helping the victims of UXO and their families. One way they do this is to gather family members of UXO victims into social groups that knit and create products such as scarves and laptop bags. The exercise serves the dual purpose of providing a social outlet for victims’ families as well as raising money to help themselves. This is an excellent idea, but the fact that the United States won’t provide the necessary funds to help the victims and their families is a moral abomination.



Probably the most heartbreaking component of the UXO Survivor Information Centre is the list of recent UXO victims. They include farmers, scrap metal collectors, and children.



Children are especially vulnerable because they find cluster bombs and try to play with them, mistakenly believing the small, round bombs are toys. Cluster bombs are notably deadly weapons because dozens of them are dispersed over a wide area from a single canister. Of the [270 million](#) cluster bombs dropped on Laos, up to 80 million did not detonate, and forty percent of UXO victims are children. (To this day, the United States refuses to give up its use and exportation of cluster bombs: it refuses to join the [Convention on Cluster Munitions](#); has [used cluster bombs](#) in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen; and [exports](#) them to dictatorships like Saudi Arabia.)

Outside Phonsavan, one will find the mysterious [Plain of Jars](#), a landscape of ancient stone structures probably used by a prehistoric community for burial purposes thousands of years ago.



There are numerous bomb craters throughout the plain:



Readers may be familiar with the term “Plain of Jars” from the late Fred Branfman’s book, [Voices from the Plain of Jars: Life under an Air War](#), which documented the atrocities US bombers were inflicting on Laotian villagers. An [excerpt](#), as written by a Laotian villager:

The people’s houses burned and were completely destroyed. The people were hit by bombs and killed, and more than thirty were wounded. Because these airplanes dropped bombs on

the village without stopping, the people had no place to go to escape. They had never before experienced anything like this. It caused parents to be taken in death from their children and children to be taken in death from their parents in great numbers, causing the people's tears to flow. Because the airplanes had dropped bombs on the ricefields and rice paddies the people saw that they could not withstand these hardships. So they fled into the forest and the jungle or different streams and caves.

The United States terrorized Laos badly enough in the war, and they are still terrorizing Laos by not providing sufficient funds to clean up the UXO. This grotesque lack of concern for one's own actions must end!

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