



Press Release
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Key Role for the Lao PDR in international fight to ban cluster munitions

Opening of the South East Asia Regional Conference on the Convention on Cluster Munitions in Xiengkhuang, Lao PDR

The UN welcomes the opening of the South East Asia Regional Conference on the Convention on Cluster Munitions in Xiengkhuang today – an important step in the global process to ban cluster munitions in which the Government of the Lao PDR is playing a key role.

This three-day conference unites governments, international organizations and civil society groups from across South East Asia and the world, promoting signature of the Convention on Cluster Munitions ahead of the Signing Conference in Oslo on 3 December 2008. H. E. Lieutenant-General Duangchay Phichit, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of the Lao PDR and Chairperson of the National Regulatory Authority for the Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Sector will open this landmark conference to increase regional support for the worldwide ban on these weapons, which cause human suffering both during conflicts and long after they have ended.

Steffen Kongstad from Norway, one of the countries which has been the driving force behind the 'Oslo Process' to achieve the worldwide cluster munitions ban, is also speaking at the conference in Xiengkhuang. Dr. Maligna Saignavongs, National Director of the NRA Office, who participated at the diplomatic conference in Dublin in May this year, will chair the technical discussion at the Xiengkhuang conference using his extensive background in international law and diplomatic skills gained through long service in the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Convention on Cluster Munitions text, adopted by 107 countries in Dublin, prohibits the use, production, transfer and stockpiling of all cluster munitions. This Convention is extremely relevant for South East Asia as peoples across the region, particularly in Lao PDR, Vietnam and Cambodia, still live with the tragic effects of the Indochina conflict. The Lao PDR, with the unenviable experience of being the most bombed country per capita in the world, is consequently the most cluster munitions affected country in the world.

More than three decades after cluster munitions were dropped throughout the Lao PDR, the remaining unexploded ordnance (UXO) and cluster sub munitions or bombies as commonly known in the Lao PDR have continued to injure and kill an average of 300 Lao people every year over the last decade. Up to 25 percent of Lao villages are affected by the presence of UXO and cluster munitions. Hiding

everywhere, these deadly weapons can be found in rice fields, school yards, on hillsides, in rivers, along roads and paths and even in the centres of provincial towns. As well as posing constant danger and threats to physical safety, cluster munitions contribute to greater food insecurity of already poor and often malnourished rural population by limiting access to arable land and killing livestock. They exacerbate poverty and make development activities more expensive, and adversely affect the socio-economic development of the entire country.

Since the process of creating an international treaty banning cluster munitions began a year and a half ago, Lao PDR has been a strong presence in the campaign. As H.E. Mr. Bounkeut Sangsomsak, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, said in his speech to the Conference on Cluster Munitions in Dublin, 19-30 May 2008 "... we do not want other peoples to experience the same pain and suffering as the Lao people have and continue to endure."

The Convention of Cluster Munitions is a much needed, truly strong and comprehensive new international standard. As the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated in his message to member states in Dublin on 30 May, the Convention will "enhance the protection of civilians, strengthen human rights and improve prospects for development."

This gathering in Xiengkhuang will be the first conference in the "Oslo Process" to be actually held at a severely cluster bombed location. By coming together here today, South East Asian States are making a landmark step towards achieving the aims of the Convention. The UN encourages States to sign the Convention on Cluster Munitions in Oslo on December 3 and to ratify without delay to allow its rapid entry into force.

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Conference Website: <http://www.undplao.org/clustermunitions.php>

Notes for editors:

The United Nations Country Team in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is committed to supporting the efforts of the Government to improve the life of all citizens, especially those most vulnerable. We shall continue to work closely with the Government and all development partners for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Our collective endeavour is to assist the people of Lao PDR to achieve progress and better standards of living for all.