

PRESS RELEASE



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New tourist venue in Luang Prabang raises awareness about the impacts of UXO

UXO LAO Visitors Centre Opening Ceremony held in Luang Prabang on 16 March 2009

A major new facility in Luang Prabang to build awareness about the UXO problem across the Lao PDR was launched on 16 March with the opening of the UXO LAO Visitors Centre. UXO LAO Luang Prabang Provincial Coordinator Mr. Houmphanh Chanthavong welcomed the Governor of Luang Prabang Province, Australian Ambassador Dr. Michele Forster, UNDP Resident Representative/UN Resident Coordinator Ms. Sonam Yangchen Rana and other distinguished guests from the development and tourism sectors as the Centre's first visitors. The project to design and construct the Centre's displays, which began in July 2008, has been undertaken by the national UXO clearance operator UXO LAO, assisted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with funds of over US\$13,000 and technical assistance, in partnership with the Australian Government, with a contribution of over US\$10,000 through the Australian Direct Aid Program (DAP).

The UXO LAO Visitors Centre is based at the UXO LAO Provincial office compound in Ban Naviengkham, about one kilometre from the centre of Luang Prabang. The Centre, which has free entry for visitors, has been established to generate wider awareness of the UXO problem in the Lao PDR, of the valuable work of UXO LAO and of the many channels by which the Government and its development partners are working to tackle the problem. Through stories of individual hardship and struggle caused by UXO accidents, the Centre will raise awareness of the channels by which affected people can be supported to continue to play a valuable and fulfilling role in their families and local communities, and Centre itself has the aim of providing sustainable employment for disabled people. The Centre can also help provide sustainability to the work of UXO LAO by generating alternative financial resources through the sale of specially created products.

As visitors to the Centre will learn from the informative and moving displays and photographs, the Lao PDR is the most heavily bombed country, per capita, in the world. Even now, more than 30 years after the end of conflict, around 300 people are killed or injured each year by UXO. People across the country are severely impacted by the threats from UXO to their lives, livelihoods and environments.

The stories told in the Centre highlight the devastating impacts of UXO on individuals going about their daily lives, for example on farmers who cannot plough land to plant crops without risking their life and health, and on children who cannot even play near their homes or walk to school in safety. Cluster munitions, or bombies, and many other types of UXO, destroy both lives and livelihoods across this

country. At a national scale, the massive presence of UXO impedes the country's entire socio-economic development.

The Lao Government is committed to reducing the impact of UXO as part of its aim by 2020 to exit "Least Developed Country" status, and United Nations agencies, international NGOs, governments and development partners continue to support the work of the UXO clearance and mitigation sector to combat the impacts of UXO on affected communities through a range of activities across the Lao PDR. With support from UNDP and other development partners, the Government played a leading role in the Oslo process to ban cluster munitions, and in December 2008 it was the second country, after the host Norway, to sign the Convention on Cluster Munitions. However the country is affected to such an extent that, without stepping up the scale of clearance and mitigation activities, it could be very difficult to successfully implement the poverty reduction programmes required to achieve the national goal of exiting LDC status.

As Ms. Sonam Yangchen Rana, UNDP Resident Representative/UN Resident Coordinator, pointed out "Those of us who work in and support this sector and who have experience of the severe consequences of UXO may take for granted that everyone is aware of the extent of the problems faced here. However many people do not know about the impacts of UXO. When visitors to Laos learn more about the short term and long term tragedies caused by UXO they are moved and impressed – moved by the scale of the problem, and impressed by the resilience and courage of the people who have to live with these dangers every day of their lives." Ms. Yangchen Rana assured the guests at the opening ceremony that all UN agencies remain committed to working together with the Lao Government, civil society organisations and development partners to mitigate the impact of cluster munitions and other UXO.

Ms Forster, the Australian Ambassador to Lao PDR, welcomed the role that the Centre will play in raising awareness of UXO challenges, as she noted that "Generating international support is vital to assisting the Government of Laos in its efforts to reduce UXO contamination and address its impacts."

The presence of this Centre in Luang Prabang World Heritage City, which is the leading visitor destination in the Lao PDR, provides an opportunity for the tourism sector to promote a sustainable tourism venue which is linked to the country's development, and which encourages visitors to learn more about the country and the contribution that they can make, both during their visit and on their return home.

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