

# UXO Lao Visitors Centre Opening Ceremony

**Remarks by: Ms. Sonam Yangchen Rana  
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Luang Prabang, Lao PDR  
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*Your excellencies the Provincial Governor, Australian Ambassador,*

*Distinguished guests, development partners, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen*

It is my great pleasure to see you all here in Luang Prabang for the opening of the UXO Lao Visitors Centre.

I am proud that UNDP in partnership with the Australian Government was able to assist UXO LAO in establishing this visitor centre. As you will see, it contains informative and moving displays aimed at telling people more about the UXO problem across the Lao PDR and the activities of UXO LAO to address the problem.

As most of us here today sadly know, the Lao PDR is one of the most heavily bombed countries, per capita, in the world. Even now, more than 30 years after the end of conflict, people throughout the country are still severely impacted by the presence of UXO, which continues to threaten their lives, livelihoods and environments.

As we will see from the stories highlighted in this Visitors Centre, the impacts of UXO on individuals going about their daily lives can be devastating – for example for farmers who cannot plough land to plant more crops without risking their life and health, and for 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. United Nations agencies, international NGOs, numerous governments and development partners continue to support the work of the UXO clearance and mitigation sector through a range of activities to combat the impacts of UXO on affected communities throughout 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 achieved the national goal of exiting LDC status.

We who work in this sector and who have experience of the severe consequences of UXO may know all this. Sometimes we may take for granted that everyone is aware of the extent of the problems faced here. However many people, including those who have come from other parts of the world and the region to discover more about the country, do not know about the impacts of UXO.

When they do 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.

That is why this Visitors Centre 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. 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.

Through these displays about the different types of UXO, risk mitigation strategies that people employ, and the valuable activities of UXO Lao, this centre will generate awareness and support of UXO Lao's work. The displays focussing on the global movement to ban against cluster munitions will generate awareness and support for the ban, and the leading part played in this global movement by the Government of the Lao PDR. Through stories of individual hardship and struggle caused by UXO accidents, this 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. This Centre itself has the aim for the future of providing sustainable employment for disabled people.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

I would like to assure you all that the 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 in this country.

Please allow me to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to the Lao Government and Australian Government, without whose support this Visitors Centre could have not been established, and to the team who have worked hard to put together the fascinating displays that you will see today.

I welcome you all here today as the Centre's first visitors.

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**Notes:**

For more information please contact Janet Pontin at the UNDP Public Information Office

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