

Beat: Travel

A TESTIMONY OF A LAO AMERICAN CITIZEN AFTER PRESIDENT OBAMA VISITED LAOS

ADDRESSED LEGACY TO WAR 7 NEW PATH

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USPA NEWS - When I was 6 years old, my family fled Laos, a country in Southeast Asia the size of Minnesota. As refugees welcomed by the United States, my parents' wish for their children was to not look back, but to take every opportunity provided in our new homeland to live a happy, fulfilled life" Khamvongsa.

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That's why I'm so proud to say that this week, President Obama became the first U.S. president to visit Laos, where he discussed his work to address this legacy of war and a new path forward to rebuild our relationship with Laos.

It wasn't until I was an adult, long after we settled in Virginia, that I learned of the painful past my parents had left behind.

During the Vietnam War, the U.S. dropped more than 2 million tons of bombs over Laos -- more than the number of bombs dropped on Germany and Japan combined during all of World War II. Sadly, the people in Laos continue to feel the tragic consequences, long after the last bomb fell.-----

Too many of these bombs did not detonate at the time. The war left most of the land contaminated with active, unexploded ordnance (UXO), in the form of cluster bombs, bullets, grenades, and mines. They've taken the lives of over 20,000 Lao -- often a child playing outside, or a farmer who has no choice but to cultivate on contaminated fields.-----

As a Lao American, I felt I couldn't help but do something. So I devoted the past 12 years of my life to promoting greater awareness of the aftermath of war and to advocating for the resources needed to address its painful legacy.

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Part of my job is to visit with dozens of families in Laos who have lost a child, father, mother, husband, wife or neighbor to a 40-year-old bomb. Just last week, I met five boys who were recently involved in an accident. Their bodies were covered with fresh wounds and stitches that will leave scars for years to come. Fortunately, they survived, but they might not be so lucky next time. Every day, teams of clearance technicians go out into the fields to detect and safely clear these bombs. It's painstaking work. But in a country that depends on agriculture for economic development, it couldn't be more important.

Under President Obama's administration, and with our advocacy and support from Congress, funding for UXO clearance and support has more than tripled. And today, the President announced additional support.-----

These critical resources support the teams of clearance workers, as well as additional projects like a national survey to locate unexploded ordnance, support for survivors, and better public awareness on how to avoid these bombs.

When our family left Laos, I never thought I would see my birth country again.-----

And I never thought that an American president would come to Laos to acknowledge the wounds that we still suffer from a decades-old war while offering resources to build a new legacy of peace. I am grateful for his leadership and so especially proud today to be American and Lao. Kop chai lai lai - thank you, Channapha Khamvongs, Said. Source Washington, D.C.

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