An Interview with Channapha Khamvongsa, Legacies of War, Founder and Executive Director

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During the Cold War, the small, landlocked, Southeast Asian country of Laos became one of the most heavily bombed countries in history. More than forty years later, millions of these bombs remain unexploded, harming and hindering the daily lives of people of Laos today. Legacies of War works to raise awareness and address this issue. I sat down with Channapha Khamvongsa, Founder and Executive Director of Legacies of War, to learn more about this problem, and Legacies’ work.

Fernando: Can you talk about the history of the “Secret War” in Laos and the impact on the country and its people?

Channapha: The United States became involved in Laos since the early 1950s because it was believed that if Laos fell to Communism it would follow the domino theory and the rest of Asia would also fall to Communism. Even though Laos is a small and landlocked country, it was geographically critical to the broader U.S. strategy in South East Asia as it is bordered by China to the North, Vietnam to the East, and Cambodia to the South. Laos was considered a neutral territory, and had signed the Geneva Accord of 1962 which forbade all foreign military intervention in Laos. Despite this, all the parties that signed the treaties, including the Vietnamese, Russians and U.S., became involved in Laos at some point.

The U.S. supported the Royal Lao government in a civil war in the north against Pathet Lao Communist forces in three ways. First, as military advisors, providing aid and recruiting military insurgents through Hmong forces. Second, beginning in 1964, when previously used strategies failed, the U.S. conducted aerial bombings over Laos. The idea was to support efforts in the northern part of the country. There was a civil war that was happening. Bombs were also dropped along the Ho Chi Min trail, which bordered Lao in the south, cutting off supply lines from North to South Vietnam. Over a 9 year period
(1964-1973) two million tons of bombs were dropped over Laos; that equates to a plane load of bombs being dropped every 8 minutes, 24 hours a day for 9 years.

These bombings were conducted by the CIA but not authorized by Congress; hence this three-pronged support strategy to the Royal Lao government was considered the “secret war.” Fast-forward to today, forty years later, the impact of the bombings continues to linger. There was a new type of weapon used then called cluster munitions which had a high defective rate, up to thirty percent of these never exploded. Thus, of the 270 million cluster bombs dropped, about 80 million still remain unexploded; these are referred to as unexploded ordnance or UXO.

**Fernando:** About how much of Laos is covered with these unexploded cluster bombs, and is it concentrated in certain regions?

**Channapha:** Every province is affected. There is a correlation between regions that have the highest poverty rates, being the most highly contaminated. The most heavily bombed areas are in Xieng Khong (in the northeast) where the civil war occurred, as well as along the Ho Chi Minh trail, provinces like Savannakhet (in the southwest, bordering Vietnam).

**Fernando:** What is the impact of these unexploded cluster bombs on people today?

**Channapha:** Since the bombings over 20,000 people have been killed or injured, and up until just four years ago 300 people were killed annually. Now, with the efforts of the last several years, the amount of casualties has been reduced to less than 100 annually. Unfortunately, 40 percent of those that are killed or injured are children, so the bombs continue to negatively impact children born to generations after the war.

**Fernando:** Is that because children unknowingly play where the cluster bombs are?

**Channapha:** Yes, children are curious about what looks like a tennis ball or toy so they tend to pick it up. Kids will be kids, and even if they know the dangers of them, they will pick them up and try to play with them or open them so that his how a lot of the injuries happen.

**Fernando:** You’ve explained to us why these unexploded cluster bombs are a problem. Legacies of War does a lot of work to raise awareness
about this issue. Can you tell how Legacies of War was founded and its mission?

**Channapha:** The inspiration for Legacies of War began with the recovery of drawings done by bombing survivors that fled the Xieng Khong area. These drawings, collected at a camp for displaced bombing victims, were the first-person testimonials to come out of Laos, and were eventually used in a Congressional hearing chaired by Senator Kennedy about the refugee situation in South East Asia. These drawings were done by villagers who had fled Xieng Khong into Vientiane (the capital of Laos) which was a safe zone. The drawings were collected by Fred Branfman who was an American educational advisor working at the Indochina Resource Center—a policy think-tank working to stop the bombings in Southeast Asia, along with a Lao friend of his. During this time the U.S. government was still in denial that these bombings were taking place. No one had the full picture, but these drawings became the first evidence by those who had survived the bombings. I came across these drawings in 2003. These drawings became the inspiration of unearthing the history of the bombings and piecing together what had happened, as well as the stories and knowledge of that period that were lost.

**Fernando:** Do you know whether, when these drawings were introduced as testimony in Congressional hearings, any progress was made? How were they received?

**Channapha:** It helped expose the extent of what was happening in Laos. Two years later the war ended. Illustrations were presented in 1971. The war ended in 1973.

**Fernando:** What about your own personal experiences? Did you grow up in Laos? Was your family impacted by the war?

**Channapha:** I was born in Vientiane. That’s where my parents had lived. Fortunately, we were not affected by the bombings as others were, but the war still impacted the entire country. I came to the U.S. when I was young and didn’t know much about the history or the extent of the secret war and while I knew and many of us knew part of our own family history, our knowledge was quite limited. Often times our parents generation did not want to talk about the past or their experiences. However, as more material became available online, I started to piece together the bigger context about how my family came here. I think it really drove me personally to want to learn more about the history, but
also discovering that it's not just about the history...today people are still being killed and maimed by what took place decades ago. Additionally, the fact that no one knew about the history and that it's still a problem was really a motivating factor to organize and found Legacies.

**Fernando:** Can you tell me what Legacies' objectives and mission are? What are some of the organization's current and/or previous projects?

**Channapha:** We have three primary goals. The first is to raise awareness about the history of the bombings in Laos. Second, to provide space for healing the wounds of war. Third, to provide a sense of hope by bringing greater resources to clear the bombs and create a safer future for the people of Laos.

We achieve these goals through educational programs—everything from travelling exhibitions to film screenings and community discussions. We integrate a lot of arts and culture into our programming, and our programs are grounded in community. We seek to provide spaces that are comfortable for people wherever they are in their process of learning about this. We also do a lot of advocacy work on the Hill to educate Congressional members and policy makers that this is still a problem. While most of them know the history, rarely do they realize the extent of the problem and severity of what happened in Laos. When we raise it, they are usually receptive. And we offer policy makers the opportunity to do the right thing.

**Fernando:** The educational programs take place across the United States, correct? Are these typically in the Laotian community, or across all communities?

**Channapha:** We anchor our programs in areas with high Laotian diasporas—Minnesota, California... We recently conducted a “Voices from Laos: Clearing Bombs, Protecting Lives” speakers tour of 12 cities where we brought a bombing survivor, who is now a victim assistance advocate, and female demining technician to talk about their experiences. This program was supported by the State Department.

**Fernando:** That’s great. How did the State Department get involved in that?

**Channapha:** We really see the State Department as a partner in this effort. There are a lot of good people at the State Department working to make sure these issues are addressed. We have worked with them over
the past several years to raise greater awareness, and support their efforts
to make sure U.S. finishes its work on this issue.

**Fernando:** I know Hillary Clinton recently made a visit to Laos. Do you
know if during her time there the issue of UXOs was addressed?

**Channapha:** We worked hard behind the scenes for over a year to
advocate and encourage (the former) Secretary Clinton to visit Laos. She
was the first Secretary of State to visit Laos in 55 years. Not since John
Dulles in 1957 has a U.S. Secretary of State visited Laos. So this visit
was quite significant and received a tremendous amount of attention,
including a lot of press.

What we did behind the scenes was to make sure that of all the
issues (the former) Secretary could talk about that she focused on UXOs.
Her visit helped propel this issue at a level we have not seen before in
the U.S. While in Laos, she had an opportunity to visit an organization
that helps bombing survivors with prosthetics. She met a survivor that
had been maimed and blinded and was quite moved. Hillary Clinton
made a statement about the need to do more. Since then State
Department has owned this issue and taken her pledge and translated it
into concrete outcomes, including being more committed do more on
this issue. So we are hopeful that more will be done.

**Fernando:** Can you talk about the progress of Legacies’ advocacy work?

**Channapha:** In 2004, the U.S. was averaging $1-2 million a year for
UXO clearance to Laos. Since our advocacy work the U.S. has doubled,
tripled, and quadrupled funding support. Now the U.S. gives $9 million
a year to Laos for UXO clearance. We feel optimistic about the direction
the U.S. is headed… but to date less than 1 percent of UXOs dropped
has been cleared, so we still have a long ways to go and hope that the
U.S. will continue to double its efforts. If U.S. doubles its’ funding over
next decade a significant amount of progress can be made.

**Fernando:** Ideally how much is needed a year to clear all the bombs?

**Channapha:** The sector budget is $30 million annually. The U.S. makes
up 30 percent of this funding; the rest comes from other international
donors who see UXOs as a barrier to development. If we can get it up to
$40 of $50 million a year tremendous progress can be made.

**Fernando:** What other countries are involved in this effort?
Channapha: The other large supporters include Norway, Japan, Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

Fernando: Do these countries just help with funding, or are they doing anything on the ground?

Channapha: Most have their own operators or NGOs affiliated with their respective countries on the ground. For example Norway has Norwegian People’s Aid which has its own clearance team. There are about ten humanitarian operators working on the ground in Laos, funded by various donors.

Fernando: What are some of the victim assistance programs that other NGOs are running?

Channapha: Victim assistance sadly gets only a small percentage of the $30 million—less than $2 million goes to support victim assistance programs. That’s where we still see a tremendous need and gap, in terms of medical care, physical rehabilitation, psychosocial support and vocational training. Clearance of bombs is something quantifiable, so it’s more attractive for donors, and obliviously it’s important. But victim assistance can definitely garner more support.

Fernando: I want to go back to a question about demining. Obviously the funding is important. Can you talk about the demining process itself? Does all demining take place through people, or are there other ways around that?

Channapha: Laos is unique in that the weapon dominant is cluster munitions as opposed to landmines. Often people talk about landmines, but they are actually quite different. Landmines are usually layed on the ground’s surface, whereas cluster munitions can be buried deep in the earth – especially over several decades. The methodology for clearing cluster munitions has remained the same, done through survey and clearance using a metal detector. That continues to be the most effective way to remove these unexploded bombs. Now there are newer survey methods, that might increase the effectiveness of surveying the land and detecting the bombs, but actual removal is very tedious. It requires going through land with metal detector. But there are advances in metal detectors that can detect the difference between a metal Coke can and a bomb. In my experience of going out and seeing work being done it is labor intensive and tiring. The people doing this work are heroic. It’s quite dangerous, it’s long and painstaking.
Fernando: Is there a particular example or story that stands out in your mind from your travels to Laos?

Channapha: What has been most amazing for me to see is how capable the people in Laos are. They are capable and able to solve this problem themselves. They live on this land. They are directly impacted, but they are not victims. They have an attitude of “we can help solve this.” I’ve met female deminers whose brothers or neighbors have been injured, which becomes part of their inspiration to do this work. It is inspiring to meet people like Manixia and Thoummy who we brought on the speakers tour. Thoummy went from being injured as a child to now leading his own organization to support other victims. I feel that is what Laos is about. The ability to persevere...there is not a sense of anger about what has happened; they aren’t bitter by the past, they just hope for a better future. People in Laos want what we all want—to provide for their families, have good opportunities, and UXOs are such a huge barrier to that.

Fernando: With all that has happened with the history, how do people in Laos feel toward the U.S., how are U.S-Laotian relations?

Channapha: I think tremendous progress has been made over the last decade. There have been more visits of the diaspora to Laos, and there has been more openness by the Lao government to receive the diaspora community. U.S-Laotian relations on government level have improved as well. There have been bilateral talks and the visit of (the former) Secretary Clinton was a tremendous a step forward. Now, there is a new incoming Ambassador to Laos. His priority issues in his statements at confirmation hearing, addressed human rights, UXOs, MIAs, and supporting and helping economic development of Laos.

Fernando: What do you hope to see Legacies of War accomplish in the future? And what are your hopes for Laos and its people in the future?

Channapha: Our hope is that the next generation, those born today, won’t have to face this problem. That a child can walk to school and parents will know they will safely return at the end of the day; that a mother and father can go off to farm their land and return whole. That’s our aspiration...that people aren’t living in fear. What that means is we need to expedite the clearance work and bring up operations on the ground to scale. If we can double the amount of funding the U.S. provides, if we can double the $9 million or $10 million the U.S. provides over the next 10 years, then what is considered high priority
land will be cleared and hopefully there will be less than 10 injuries a year. Obviously one death is too many in our mind, but our hope is to continue to reduce the risk... for us that would be considered tremendous progress.

Fernando: We have discussed the history of the war in Laos, problem of UXOs, its impact, and Legacies’ work, is there anything else you think that is important to share?

Channapha: Despite the severity of this problem, we’re so hopeful and we know it’s a problem that is solvable. This is a rare policy issue and problem with a definitive solution and end. It’s just a matter of political will to sustain support efforts on the ground so we can really solve this problem in the next decade so that future generations will not be impacted by these past bombings.