

NARROWCASTERS

The ‘Secret War’ No Longer a Secret: New Audio Tour with Interviews of Survivors of Viengxay

For nine years between 1964 and 1973, the US bombed Laos every single day, from morning until night. More bombs were dropped on Laos than were dropped on all of Europe in WWII.

The bombing of Laos was almost never mentioned in the US. It truly was The Secret War. It wasn't even called that in the US until years later. From the start, the Laotians call it The American War. They knew who was bombing them.

The people of Laos and their leaders survived by hiding in a vast system of over 400 caves near Viengxay. From there, the government bravely carried on. The caves are now a national historic site.

A spellbinding and wrenching new audio tour of the Caves of Viengxay tells how these people survived. Forty were interviewed. One, Mr. Somvichith Taboudy, remembers the different kinds of bombs and what they did:

There were many different kinds of bombs; some light and some heavy. Some didn't explode on landing, but only exploded when they were touched. They were scattered throughout the rice fields. When they were touched they detonated. This was one kind in the rice fields. If cows, buffalos, horses or other animals ate these, then they would die. For example, if ducks tried to peck them, they would explode, killing the ducks.

The buffalos and cows thought they were like salt; when they ate them, they would explode inside their stomachs killing them. These bombs were silent but ignited fires. These also could contaminate the grass and when they were eaten by horses it would burn their stomachs.

The audio tour ends with these words:

The war is still having its effect on children born decades after the conflict ended. UXO – explosive ordnance that didn't detonate when fired or dropped – contaminates the whole country and prevents people from using land. UXO might be hidden under a school playing field or a house, or in fields... When they are disturbed, by digging or often by children picking them up and playing with them, they explode.

It is estimated that UXO kills and injures one person a day every day in Laos.

There are major UXO clearance operations working around Laos, but it will take another 20 years just to clear the land for farming.

At a meeting held in Oslo on the 3rd of December 2008, 94 governments signed the Convention on Cluster Munitions. This bans the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of these deadly weapons, and commits member states to help those countries contaminated by them to clear their land and care for victims. The Government of the Lao PDR played a major role in campaigning for the global ban. The United States did not sign the Convention in Oslo.

Penny Street, director of Narrowcasters which produced the audio tour on a non-profit basis, said: “I thought it was the very least we could do for these incredibly brave and forgiving people. We must learn that this is never, ever the answer.”

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11 November 2009