

Statement by Ambassador Maligna SAIGNAVONGS,  
Director of the National Regulatory Authority (NRA)  
for UXO/Mine Action Sector  
in Lao People's Democratic Republic,  
At the Meeting of the Standing Committee of States Parties  
of the Ottawa Convention, Geneva, 2-6 June 2008.

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Mr. Chairman,  
Distinguished Members of the Standing Committee,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, on behalf of the Lao Government, I would like to thank you for allowing me, as representative of a State not Party, to take the floor before this Assembly. I would like to take this opportunity in sharing with you some information which will explain why the Lao Government still hesitates to sign the Ottawa Convention.

As you may have heard, Laos has the un-enviable distinction of being the most heavily bombed country in the World.

During the period between 1964 and 1973, Laos was subjected to intense ground battles and to heavy aerial bombings. While, here, in Europe, the Press mentioned shyly "the Secret war" or "the Forgotten war" in Laos.

Anti-personnel landmines were, then, laid by the warring factions to protect their respective strongholds, but no specific information on the exact nature and extent of mine contamination was available.

But during the same period, more than 580,000 bombing missions or "Sorties" were carried out over the country, or one sortie every 8 minutes, for almost 10 years, dropping more than 2 million tons of bombs; many of them were cluster bombs dispensing about 270 million sub-munitions bomblets, called locally "bombies", that act as a type of anti-personnel weapon.

It was estimated that up to 30% of these bombs failed to detonate on impact, and bombies alone accounted for approximately 80 million of UXO.

More than 87,000 sq km, or 37% of the surface of the country are contaminated, of which more than 12,000 sq km are considered as high risk zone. 14 out of 17 provinces, and more than 2,800 villages, or 25% of all villages in the country are affected.

Many of the most highly contaminated villages are in remote, difficult to reach areas of the country; so, the country is more contaminated by UXO than by landmines. The existing minefields are mostly in lower priority locations.

In addition to Cluster munitions and landmines, the Lao PDR is also contaminated with unexploded heavy bombs, rockets, grenades, artillery munitions, and mortars.

So, above the minefields, there are many and many UXO.

In the Lao context, people are more affected by UXO than by landmines, since most of the accidents are caused by UXO, particularly by cluster munitions.

Just to give you some figures: During the period from the beginning of January 1996 to the end of December 2007, our Clearance and Roving operations Teams have destroyed more than 815,000 UXOs, including 381,013 Bombies, and only 5,753 landmines. This makes the Lao case different from the case of other Mine affected countries.

With regard to the Ottawa Convention, the Lao PDR is not producer of AP landmines and has no capacity to develop them.

It did use them in the past to protect its borders; but did not use them anymore during the past two decades, since the country is enjoying a situation of peace and good relationship with all its neighbours.

It has a small quantity in stockpile for national defence, but did not transfer them to any country or any organization.

So, the Lao PDR has no major difficulty with the General Obligations of the Convention.

But, it still has some concerns on the implementation of Article 5, which rest on two points:

- The 10 year deadline:

Given, on the one hand, that we have no records of the location of the mined areas, and, on the other hand, the magnitude of the UXO contamination, we fear that we will not be able to comply with the 10 year deadline. Just to give you some figures: In over 10 years, from the beginning of January 1996 to the end of December 2007, our operation teams have cleared only about 130 sq km (or 0.15%) out of 87,000 sq km impacted areas.

Of course, there is a possibility for requesting an extension of the deadline; but, in our case, how many extensions do you think that the

Meetings and the Review Conferences of States Parties will agree to grant us?

- Another point, as we understand it, is that once the Convention enters into force for the Lao PDR, the Lao Government will have to devote all efforts to locate, mark and destroy anti-personnel landmines in known or suspected mined areas, which is practically not feasible, and to abandon or stop UXO clearance activities.

If this is the case, the Lao Government will not be in a position to accept it, because our priority is UXO clearance; since most of the accidents are caused by UXO, particularly by Cluster Munitions, as I mentioned previously.

Mr. Chairman,

Although the Lao PDR is not yet a State Party to the Ottawa Convention, but as a country affected by UXO and landmines, and as witness of the suffering of its own people who are victims and survivors of UXO, it supports the humanitarian concepts of the Convention, and shares the concerns of the International Community on the impact of anti-personnel landmines on civilian population.

For this reason, on 5 December 2007, the Lao PDR has voted in favour of the UN General Assembly Resolution on the “Implementation of the Ottawa Convention”. Besides, the Lao PDR has also signed, in January of this year, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Also in this context, in our UXO/Mine Action Programme, particularly with regard to the three main pillars of Mine Action, namely Clearance, Mine Risk Education and Victim Assistance, our National Standards are consistent with the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS).

Mr. Chairman,

To conclude, I would like to say that the Lao Government is considering the eventuality of joining the Ottawa Convention. Nevertheless, it needs the assurance from the States Parties that, once the Lao PDR becomes signatory thereof, it will not be forced to abandon or stop its current UXO clearance operations. Of course, it is understood that landmines will be destroyed, when they are found, during the course of UXO clearance.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

