

# Remarks by President Obama at the Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) Centre

COPE Visitor Centre Vientiane, Laos

10:44 A.M. ICT

**PRESIDENT OBAMA:** Good morning, everybody. As you saw, we just had the opportunity to learn more about the very important work that's being done here at the COPE Center, and about the magnitude of the challenge posed by unexploded ordnance.

For many people, war is something that you read about in books -- you learn the names of battles, the dates of conflicts, and you look at maps and images that depict events from long ago. For the United States, one of the wars from our history is the conflict called the Vietnam War. It's a long and complicated conflict that took the lives of many brave young Americans. But we also know that despite its American name, what we call it, this war was not contained to Vietnam. It included many years of fighting and bombing in Cambodia and here in Laos. But for all those years in the 1960s and '70s, America's intervention here in Laos was a secret to the American people, who were separated by vast distances and a Pacific Ocean, and there was no Internet, and information didn't flow as easily.

For the people of Laos, obviously, this war was no secret. Over the course of roughly a decade, the United States dropped more bombs on Laos than Germany and Japan during World War II. Some 270 million cluster bomblets were dropped on this country. You can see some of these displays showing everything that landed on relatively simple homes like this, and farms and rural areas. By some estimates, more bombs per capita were dropped on Laos than any other country in the world.

For the people of Laos, war was also something that was not contained to a battlefield. In addition to soldiers and supply lines, bombs that fell from the sky killed and injured many civilians, leaving painful absences for so many families.

For the people of Laos, the war did not end when the bombs stopped falling. Eighty million cluster munitions did not explode. They were spread across farmlands, jungles, villages, rivers. So for the last four decades, Laotians have continued to live under the shadow of war. Some 20,000 people have been killed or wounded by this unexploded ordnance, or UXO.

For the people of Laos, then, these are not just statistics. These bomblets have taken the lives of farmers working in the fields, traders gathering scrap metal, children playing outside who thought these small, metal balls could be turned into a toy.

And for the people of Laos, this is also about the ability to make a good living. In communities that rely so much on agriculture, you can't reach your potential on land that is littered with UXOs. As one farmer said, "We need our land to be cleared of bombs. If it weren't for the bombs, I would multiply

my production.”

We also know that the people of Laos are resilient. We see that determination in members of the clearance teams that we met, men and women who have worked for years -- this very young lady says she's been at it for 20 years -- all across this country to find UXO and eliminate them one by one. And I'm glad that we could be joined by them today.

We see the determination in the survivors of UXOs. Some of you heard me talking to Thoummy Silamphan, who joins us here today. When he was just a young child, he was badly wounded by a UXO explosion and lost his left hand. But rather than losing hope, he's dedicated his life to providing hope for others. Through his organization, the Quality of Life Association, Thoummy has helped survivors get medical care, find work, rebuild their lives with a sense of dignity.

And we see that determination in the many organizations like this one. Here at COPE, you provide assistance to those who have suffered because of UXO while shining a spotlight on the work that still has to be done. And in that effort, I'm very glad that America is your partner.

When I took office, we were spending \$3 million each year to address the enormous challenge of UXO. We have steadily increased that amount, up to \$15 million last year. This funding -- together with the work of the Lao government, UXO Lao, other international donors and several non-governmental organizations -- has allowed us to fund clearance efforts while also developing plans for a nationwide survey that can help locate UXO and focus clearance efforts on areas that have the most potential for economic development.

So yesterday, I was proud to announce a significant increase in America's commitment to this work. We will invest \$90 million over the next three years to this effort. Our hope is that this funding can mark a decisive step forward in the work of rolling back the danger of UXO -- clearing bombs, supporting survivors, and advancing a better future for the people of Laos.

As President of the United States, I believe that we have a profound moral and humanitarian obligation to support this work. We're a nation that was founded on the belief in the dignity of every human being. Sometimes we've struggled to stay true to that belief, but that is precisely why we always have to work to address those difficult moments in history and to forge friendships with people who we once called enemies.

That belief in the value of every human being is what motivates the teams of Americans who travel to remote parts of this land to find the remains of hundreds of Americans who have been missing so that their families can receive some measure of comfort. That belief has to lead us to value the life of every young Lao boy and girl, who deserve to be freed from the fear of the shadow of a war that happened long ago.

Doing this work also builds trust. History does not have to drive us apart; it can sometimes pull us

together. And addressing the most painful chapters in our history honestly and openly can create openings, as it has done in Vietnam, to work together on other issues, so that violence is replaced by peaceful commerce, cooperation, and people-to-people ties.

And above all, acknowledging the history of war and how it's experienced concretely by ordinary people is a way that we make future wars less likely. We have to force ourselves to remember that war is not just about words written in books, or the names of famous men and battles. War is about the countless millions who suffer in the shadows of war -- the innocents who die, and the bombs that remain unexploded in fields decades after.

Here in Laos, here at COPE, we see the victims of bombs that were dropped because of decisions made half a century ago and we are reminded that wars always carry tremendous costs, many of them unintended. People have suffered, and we've also seen, though, how people can be resourceful and resilient. It helps us recognize our common humanity. And we can remember that most people want to live lives of peace and security. We embrace the hope that out of this history, we can make decisions that lead to a better future for the people of Laos, for the United States, for the world.

Thank you very much, everybody.

END 10:51 A.M. ICT