

Calcuttan in Laos killing field clean-up

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Vientiane, Nov. 7: Laos is the living killing fields, not the gruesome graveyard that the despot Pol Pot regime littered with corpses in Cambodia. And an Indian, Avi Sarkar, is helping to clean it up.

In the Indo-China war when the US battled the North Vietnamese, its B-52 bombers dropped over 2 million tonnes of bombs and over 90 million anti-personnel cluster bomblets over Laos — far more than that in Vietnam and more than all the bombs dropped during the Second World War.

Laos is paying the price today: more than 30 per cent of those bombs did not explode. Thirty years after the war, Laos is scarred every second day when those unexploded ordnances — that are lumped together under the grisly acronym UXOs — go off in 15 of its 18 provinces that are declared contaminated.

UXO Lao — a UN-backed programme devised by the Laos government — is struggling to clear

the unexploded bombs that were dropped over 30 years ago and are strewn across two-thirds of the war-ravaged country.

"It's a nightmare out there. There have been 12,000 accidents between 1973 and 2001 in which over 6,000 people have died. Half of those victims have been children. Many others have been maimed for life. Death is as sudden as it is devastating," says Thongdeng Singthirath, deputy national programme director of the Lao National UXO Programme (UXO Lao).

UXO Lao is a programme with two objectives: reduce the civilian casualties caused by unexploded ordnance, and clear the land for agriculture and socioeconomic development.

India isn't involved in UXO Lao — and by all accounts it did not come up for discussion during Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's talks with Laoitain officials over the past two days.

Its only involvement with the programme is through 30-something Sarkar who is a management adviser to UXO Lao. "At the



AB Vajpayee with Laos Prime Minister Bounnhang Vorachit. (PTI)

current pace of work, one estimate says it will take at least 1,300 years to clear Laos of the bombs," says Sarkar who, born and raised in Calcutta, came

here four years ago and is now married to a Laotian. UXO Lao has an annual budget of \$4 million. But it is badly strapped for cash and has had to

confine the scale of its operations to nine of the worst-affected provinces.

Laos was caught up in the vortex of the bloody battle in Indo-China when North Vietnamese troops moved into the eastern part of the country to carry out attacks on the US-backed Saigon regime. Laos and Vietnam share a common border.

To stop North Vietnamese troops, the US conducted 580,000 aerial bombing missions, which have been "likened to the equivalent of a payload of bombs being dropped every eight minutes for nine years," says the annual report of UXO Lao for 2001. The average daily cost of this bombing effort was \$219,000.

The US is funding UXO Lao and is one of the biggest — but not the biggest, which honour goes to Denmark and Norway — of the 18 donors.

UXO Lao, which had 1,100 field workers till 2001, has had to cut back its staffing level to 640 this year because of the funds crunch.

The US has, however, provided some help by opening up the

records of all its bombing runs over Laos in the seventies. "It has helped us map the most sensitive areas," says Kathryn Sweet, UXO Lao's programme office advisor.

Early this year, UXO Lao had its first casualty when two field workers died while defusing what Sweet and most of those that work on the programme call the "bombies".

The Laotian killing fields aren't in the world's consciousness: unlike the killing fields of Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge regime slaughtered over 2 million people and which director Roland Joffe turned into a famous movie based upon a true story of friendship, loyalty, the horrors of war and survival. It was called the Killing Fields.

UXO Lao needs either a Joffe or a celebrity endorser like Princess Diana who was the most visible supporter of the Nobel peace prize-winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

Cambodia is a horror show that is over: Laos is a horror show that continues.