

## **PRIME MINISTER GIVES MINE ACTION TRACTION**

On Dec 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Vietnam launched the National Steering Committee for Mine Action at the Vietnam Mine Action Donor Meeting in Hanoi. The timing, coming just a day before the annual meeting of the Consultative Group for Vietnam (the main development effectiveness meeting between the Government and donors), plus the fact that Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung opened proceedings, were clear indications of the importance the Government is placing on its mine action initiative. The timing represents an effort to link mine action with the broader development discussion; a point highlighted by the Prime Minister in his remarks at the start of the Consultative Group meeting: “Although now a low middle income country, Vietnam still faces heavy consequences of the wars. On average, there are about 1,300 deaths per year since 1975 due to landmines and exploded bombs. With the success of the economic growth in Viet Nam in recent years, we still have a lot of difficulties. We will try our best to advance our economy and we appreciate the support of the international development partners.” This is the first time that this issue of war legacy is officially mentioned at the highest level in the multilateral forum of discussion on Vietnam’s development policies.

At the Vietnam Mine Action Donor Meeting, the Government and the development partners discussed the landmine, unexploded ordnance (UXO) problem in Vietnam, and presented their perspectives on mine action priorities for funding over the next five years. UXO contamination is a legacy from the conflicts that ended almost four decades ago, leaving Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos the most contaminated region in the world today.

The interest of the development partners was confirmed by the presence of more than 200 attendees, including seven ambassadors and senior United Nations officials, representatives from many other embassies, aid agencies, NGOs, and the private sector. The ambassadors from the United States, Norway – two of the principal mine action donors both in Vietnam and globally – delivered statements.

U.S. Ambassador David Shear said that “the United States has provided over \$62 million to help Vietnam cope with this painful legacy...Our efforts to help Vietnam deal with this difficult problem have helped build the mutual trust and understanding between the U.S. and Vietnam that has allowed our bilateral relationship to flourish”.

Norwegian Ambassador Stale T. Risa said that “As one of the most affected countries in the world, Vietnam is a key actor with important knowledge to share with other affected countries. I hope to see Vietnam play the role of a regional torch bearer for the Convention on Cluster Munitions.”

In addition, a representative from the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) Ted Paterson presented the recent changes in Vietnam’s mine action program and compared Vietnam’s program to other large national mine action programs in the world.

This first Vietnam Mine Action Donor Meeting was well covered by the media, national and international. The CNN had a live broadcast interview on Dec 6<sup>th</sup>, on the International Desk Program on mine/UXO problem in Vietnam with two guests United Nations Mine Action Service Director Justin Brady from New York, USA and Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation Country Director Thao Nguyen from Hanoi, Vietnam.

### **What is Mine Action?**

For well over a century, militaries around the world have conducted demining operations. Mine action, a new term since 1989, adds four key innovations including focusing on making land safe for civilian use which requires higher quality standards in demining operations, providing Mine Risk Education for civilians living in contaminated areas, victims assistance and advocacy to ensure the rights of mine/UXO victims for sound education and meaningful employment. This has created a natural alliance between mine action and many organizations working for the rights of people with disabilities. Vietnam had signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and subsequently in May 2010 it enacted legislation to put this international treaty into effect within the country.

The final key innovation is a commitment to restrict the future use of weapons that do the most harm to civilian populations. Two categories of these weapons are now covered by international treaties, the Ottawa Treaty on anti-personnel landmines (1997) and the Oslo Treaty on cluster munitions (2008). Cluster munitions include bombs which house ‘bomblets’ which are dispersed and explode (or fail to explode) above the ground or upon an impact. It is these bomblets which still pose major problems in rural Vietnam today. While not all countries have signed these treaties, the majority have. Many of the non-signatories, including China and the US, have announced they support the

humanitarian aims of the treaties and that they no longer use anti-personnel landmines. Vietnam is a non-signatory to both treaties.

### **Legacies of War in Vietnam**

As documented in the World Bank's 2011 World Development Report, "Conflict, Security & Development", large-scale conflicts impose tremendous costs that constrain a country's development for decades. Few countries in the world are as well aware of the problems created by landmines and other explosive remnants of war as is Vietnam.

The Government estimates that more than 42,000 people have been killed in landmine/ UXO accidents since 1975, and new victims are recorded regularly. As well, because Vietnam did not possess enough sophisticated mine/bomb detectors for deep clearance; bombs that were buried deeper still pose a hazard when new infrastructure projects are undertaken.

After the successful Doi Moi reforms led to rapid economic growth, growing demand for new infrastructure, and a surge in both public and private investment, the Government issued Decree 96 in 2006, stipulating that the Ministry of Defense (MoD) would be responsible for all demining operations. MoD had its Engineering Command and firms managed and staffed by former military deminers provide demining services in support of development projects.

Since the late 90s, UNICEF and mine action NGOs from Britain, Germany, Australia, Norway and the US began working with the Ministry of Defense and provincial governments to launch mine action programs in some of the heavily contaminated central provinces. These initiatives have a broader focus to reduce casualties, assist victims and facilitate development in remote communities, as well as to allow construction work to proceed in safety.

To date, however, these internationally financed mine action activities remain small in comparison to demining financed by the Government, which reached an estimated \$75 million in 2009 and over \$100 million in 2010.

### **Vietnam's new National Mine Action Program**

The new Mine Action Program embraces these new initiatives by national, provincial governments, and international NGOs. In addition, Vietnam has announced that it actively exploring the possibility of signing the Oslo Treaty banning cluster munitions, and is preparing a roadmap for this purpose. As well, discussions have started with Cambodia and Laos which should lead to greater regional cooperation on mine action. In the broader international realm, Government officials have begun to engage far more actively in international meetings on landmines, cluster munitions and other explosive remnants of war.

The scope of Vietnam's mine action program was well-summarized by Director General of the Vietnam Bomb and Mine Action Center (VBMAC) Dr Nguyen Trong Canh that "The Government's new Mine Action Program has provisions for clearance, risk education and victim assistance, and we are building closer links with donor countries and other countries affected by explosives contamination to learn from each other how best to solve the problem of explosives contamination."

Asked to comment on this international dimension of mine action in Vietnam, Ted Paterson from GICHD said that "Vietnam's efforts in dealing with its UXO problem have been very impressive. Its National Mine Action Program is, on many measures, the largest in the world. The country provides a model for other post-conflict countries, but there are also real opportunities for Vietnam to learn from successful innovations in other parts of the world."

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By GICHD-VVAF