

Laos is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. It is at least 20 years behind all the other countries of that region.

From 1964 to 1973, the U.S. dropped more than two million tons of ordnance on Laos during 580,000 bombing missions—equal to a planeload of bombs every 8 minutes, 24-hours a day, for 9 years – making Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history. The bombings were part of the U.S. Secret War in Laos to support the Royal Lao Government against the Pathet Lao (Communist) and to interfere with traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The bombings destroyed many villages and displaced hundreds of thousands of Lao civilians during the nine-year period.

Up to a third of the bombs dropped did not explode, leaving Laos contaminated with vast quantities of unexploded ordnance (UXO). Over 20,000 people have been killed or injured by UXO in Laos since the bombing ceased.



Here are some other startling facts about the U.S. bombing of Laos and its tragic aftermath:

Over 270 million cluster bombs were dropped on Laos during the Vietnam War (210 million more bombs than were dropped on Iraq in 1991, 1998 and 2006 combined); up to 80 million did not detonate.

Nearly 40 years on, **less than 1%** of these munitions have been destroyed. More than half of all confirmed cluster munitions casualties in the world have occurred in Laos.

Each year there continue to be over 100 new casualties in Laos. Close to 60% of the accidents result in death, and 40% of the victims are children.

Between 1996 and 2012, the U.S. contributed on average \$2.6M per year for UXO clearance in Laos; the U.S. spent \$17M per day for nine years bombing Laos.

The U.S. spent as much in **three days bombing** Laos (\$51M,) than it spent for clean up over 16 years (\$51M).

The communist forces overthrew the monarch in 1975 which was the start of years of isolation for this tiny country, which is 25% the size of Ontario. The infrastructure of the country was destroyed from all the bombing. It will take hundreds of years to clean up since there is still 9 million unexploded ordnance still in its soils and they have not been able to recover. This fact along with an 80% mountainous terrain and being a landlocked nation has resulted in extreme poverty, poor medical care, if any and an 8.1 infant mortality.

73% of the population live in remote villages, some without access to any water at all. Those who have access have only very polluted water. **ADOPT A VILLAGE IN LAOS** is a registered charitable organization whose mandates are to assist in the provision of the basic necessities for life in the rural villages. Their primary focus is to fund and provide assistance with water where none exists (or is inadequate for the needs of the village), water filtration, toilets, hygiene training and schools. Their secondary focus is to support students who wish to learn and cannot afford to go, teachers during their apprenticeship year and solar technology where electricity is not yet available.

Steve Rutledge from Port Hope, founder of Adopt a Village in Laos, is a volunteer on the ground in Laos for four months of each year and has accomplished the following over the past few years.

- He has supervised 6 schools construction projects, one of which included a school addition to a current school.
- He has installed 19 permanent water supplies
- Made huge upgrades to a hospital (which services many surrounding villages) including the installation of a well and running water to each room in the hospital. Imagine a hospital with no water!
- Built over 40 banks of toilets to a village, schools and a community centre.
- Installed electricity in 3 villages including solar panels in two.
- Distributed over 5700 water filters, one family at a time, serving just under 30,000 rural villagers.
- Supplies feminine hygiene pads to secondary schools, during their hygiene training programs.
- Continues to sponsor a host of secondary and university students.

There are many other projects that he is involved in: i.e. building fences around compounds to keep the water buffalo out, furnishing a huge education centre (where they train teachers), bought 52 bicycles for school kids, school supplies, provided critical funding to those who could not afford to go to the hospital and more.

For all projects, he must get approval from local governments so that they are not rejected upon completion. He cultivates good relations with the chief of each village and all the elders. Much socializing is done to make all efforts welcome and accepted.

RELIGION IN LAOS:

Buddhist: 61.05 %

Animist: 31.5 %

Animism encompasses the belief that there is no separation between the spiritual and physical (or material) world, and souls or spirits exist, not only in humans, but also in all other animals, plants, rocks, geographic features such as mountains or rivers, or other entities of the natural environment, including thunder, wind, and shadows.

Non-religious/other: 4.3 %

Christian: 1.85 %

Muslim: 1.1 %

Chinese religions: 0.5%

The communist government has tried to suppress all religion, as religion competes for the minds of people. They are now supportive of Buddhism.

TRIBES:

There are so many different “tribes” and they have different styles of living and different ways of life. The cultures are all so very different. Some are hunter-gatherers, some have their houses right on the ground, some have their houses on stilts. Some of the primary tribes are Lao, Khmu and Hmong.

GEOGRAPHY:

Laos is a landlocked country, bounded by China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar (formerly Burma) and Thailand. 50% of the country is mountainous. Most life centres around the Mekong River and its tributaries. The river irrigates rice paddies and provides some fish. The usual diet is fish and sticky rice.

About Steve Rutledge

Steve grew up in Georgetown Ontario and spent his career as co-owner of a mid sized computer company in Toronto. Since retirement he has narrowed his focus on local and international community support. Steve has served on several boards and committees in Port Hope including the Municipal Culture Committee, Parks, Rec and Culture Committee, Skatepark committee, Capitol Theatre Board of Directors and others.



Filters and training are ready to go, as the bell rings (actually it was a tire rim) to invite the families to the newly constructed community centre, called the Ban Lath An Meeting House.

March 10, 2020

He has received two civic awards, the latest for philanthropy and is a multiple Paul Harris award recipient for his efforts (2 clubs) and awarded the Spirit of Rotary award in 2016. In 2018, he received the Family and Community Service award from the Rotary Club of Courtice. His most recent award was the coveted Dr. Bob Scott Disease Prevention award from Rotary District 7070 in June 2020.

With his partner they created a number of large events including one they held in their home netting \$61,000 for the Capitol theatre and another town event for 6000 people.

For the last 11 years Steve has ventured into Laos serving the rural villagers with the most basic of needs for sustained life.

Since 2009, Adopt A Village in Laos has completed over 65 villages with filtered water one family at a time, serving just over 30,000 rural villagers, constructed 19 permanent water supplies, repaired numerous others, built about 40 banks of toilets, 12 school construction projects and continues to sponsor a host of primary, secondary and university students.