

40 Years On, Laotians Tell Of US War Legacy

BY MATTHEW PENNINGTON
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Forty years after the secret U.S. bombing that devastated Laos, heirs to the war’s deadly legacy of undetonated explosives are touring America to prod the conscience of the world’s most powerful nation for more help to clear up the mess.

Two young Laotians — one a bomb disposal technician, the other the victim of an accidental explosion — arrived Friday on the anniversary of the end of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and its far-less publicized bombing of neighboring Laos. The U.S. dropped 2 million tons of bombs on Laos over a nine-year period up to 1973 — more than on Germany and Japan during World War II.

Manixia Thor, 25, works on an all-female team that clears bombs and other explosives from villages and farm land in her native province of Xieng Khouang, one of the worst-hit areas of the country. Joining her on the speaking tour is Thoummy Silamphan, 26, who lost his left hand to a cluster bomb at age 8 as he dug for bamboo shoots to put in soup. He’s from a poor farming family in the same province and counsels victims of ordnance accidents that still maim dozens of Lao each year.

Experts estimate that about 30 percent of the cluster bombs failed to explode after they were dropped from high-flying aircraft, as the U.S. attempted to crush communist forces in Laos and interdict the Vietcong supply line known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. Large swaths of northern Laos and its eastern border with Vietnam remain contaminated.

Manixia, who is ethnic Hmong and has a 2-year-old son, said her grandparents passed down to her stories of how they hid in limestone caves during the bombing that obliterated virtually all of the province’s free-standing buildings and left its plains and mountainsides pock-marked by craters.

About 15 years ago, her uncle lost his left hand as he attempted to salvage ball bearings from inside a cluster bomb. He joined an estimated toll of 20,000

civilians killed or injured by explosives since the war.

Manixia works for the British charity, the Mines Advisory Group. Like Thoummy, it’s her first trip to America. Their tour, organized by an American charity, Legacies of War, and funded by the State Department, will also take them to New York, California, Oregon, Washington state and Minnesota as they talk about “UXO,” or unexploded ordnance.

“I came here because I want to share with people the continuing dangers of UXO in Laos,” Manixia said. “There’s still a lot of work to do (to clear UXO) and not enough resources to do it. I don’t want people to be injured like my uncle was, or for my son to grow up and also be hurt.”

Despite efforts to educate about the dangers of the explosives, about 40 percent of the victims in the past 10 years have been children.

Thoummy said that last month two accidental explosions injured six people in Xieng Khouang, two of them seriously. Three of them were boys foraging for bamboo; the others were caught in a blast while burning stubble in a rice field.

Thoummy, whose prosthetic arm is hard to spot when he wears a tan jacket, works for Quality of Life Association, a Laotian nonprofit that helps victims cope with the kind of depression that he grappled with as a boy after his accident.

“My life had stopped. I wanted to die. I stayed at home and although my family tried to encourage me, I didn’t care,” he said.

But his outlook changed after a 10-minute conversation he had five months after his accident with a Lao government official — a survivor of a bomb accident who inspired him to get on with his life and complete his education. He later studied business management at a local college.

Thoummy is keen to recount his own experiences and bears no apparent grudge against the U.S. Asked if America is responsible for clearing the unexploded bombs, he squirms a little and concludes: “It would be good if the USA thinks about the problem in Laos and if we have more support.”

Traditionalists Upset With Pope Francis

BY NICOLE WINFIELD
Associated Press

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis has won over many hearts and minds with his simple style and focus on serving the world’s poorest, but he has devastated traditionalist Catholics who adored his predecessor, Benedict XVI, for restoring much of the traditional pomp to the papacy.

Francis’ decision to disregard church law and wash the feet of two girls — a Serbian Muslim and an Italian Catholic — during a Holy Thursday ritual has become something of the final straw, evidence that Francis has little or no interest in one of the key priorities of Benedict’s papacy: reviving the pre-Vatican II traditions of the Catholic Church.

One of the most-read traditionalist blogs, “Rorate Caeli,” reacted to the foot-washing ceremony by declaring the death of Benedict’s eight-year project to correct what he considered the botched interpretations of the Second Vatican Council’s modernizing reforms.

“The official end of the reform of the reform — by example,” “Rorate Caeli” lamented in its report on Francis’ Holy Thursday ritual.

A like-minded commentator in Francis’ native Argentina, Marcelo Gonzalez at International Catholic Panorama, reacted to Francis’ election with this phrase: “The Horror.” Gonzalez’s beef? While serving as the archbishop of Buenos Aires, the then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s efforts to revive the old Latin Mass so dear to Benedict and traditionalists were “non-existent.”

Virtually everything he has done since being elected pope, every gesture, every decision, has rankled traditionalists in one way or another.

The night he was chosen pope, March 13, Francis emerged from the loggia of St. Peter’s Basilica without the ermine-rimmed red velvet cape,

or mozzetta, used by popes past for official duties, wearing instead the simple white cassock of the papacy. The cape has since come to symbolize his rejection of the trappings of the papacy and to some degree the pontificate of Benedict XVI, since the German pontiff relished in resurrecting many of the liturgical vestments of his predecessors.

Francis also received the cardinals’ pledges of obedience after his election not from a chair on a pedestal as popes normally do but rather standing, on their same level. For traditionalists who fondly recall the days when popes were carried on a sedan chair, that may have stung. In the days since, he has called for “intensified” dialogue with Islam — a gesture that rubs traditionalists the wrong way because they view such a heavy focus on interfaith dialogue as a sign of religious relativism.

Francis may have rubbed salt into the wounds with his comments at the Good Friday procession at Rome’s Colosseum, which re-enacts Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, praising “the friendship of our Muslim brothers and sisters” during a prayer ceremony that recalled the suffering of Christians in the Middle East.

Francis also raised traditional eyebrows when he refused the golden pectoral cross offered to him right after his election by Monsignor Guido Marini, the Vatican’s liturgy guru who under Benedict became the symbol of Benedict’s effort to restore the Gregorian chant and heavy silk brocaded vestments of the pre-Vatican II liturgy to papal Masses.

Marini has gamely stayed by Francis’ side as the new pope puts his own stamp on Vatican Masses with no-nonsense vestments and easy off-the-cuff homilies. But there is widespread expectation that Francis will soon name a new master of liturgical ceremonies more in line with his priorities of bringing the

church and its message of love and service to ordinary people without the “high church” trappings of his predecessor.

There were certainly none of those trappings on display Thursday at the Casal del Marmo juvenile detention facility in Rome, where the 76-year-old Francis got down on his knees to wash and kiss the feet of 12 inmates, two of them women. The rite re-enacts Jesus’ washing of the feet of his 12 apostles during the Last Supper before his crucifixion, a sign of his love and service to them.

The church’s liturgical law holds that only men can participate in the rite, given that Jesus’ apostles were all male. Priests and bishops have routinely petitioned for exemptions to include women, but the law is clear.

Francis, however, is the church’s chief lawmaker, so in theory he can do whatever he wants.

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