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Statement submitted by Mines Advisory Group, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

In support of the sixty-fifth session on the Commission on the Status of Women, Mines Advisory Group (MAG) seeks to champion the innovative community development model taking place in operational programs in Laos. The organizations aim to shine a light on the role women are taking to rebuild their communities with a renewed focus on gender equity and peace, and to encourage the United Nations to ensure progress for women remains a priority in all facets of development.

From 1964 to 1973, more than 2 million tons of cluster munitions were dropped on Laos in 580,000 distinct bombing missions; the equivalent of a planeload of munitions dropped every eight minutes, 24 hours a day, for nine years. During this period, more explosives were dropped on Laos than the United States deployed in Germany and Japan through the duration of World War II, making Laos one of the most bombed countries in the world per capita.

There is no agreed figure on remaining contamination in Laos, but current data suggests that approximately 600 square miles of land still requires clearance, an area equivalent to the size of Houston, Texas. Contamination prevents communities from fully utilizing their land, with the main economic activity of agriculture for rural communities accounting for a large proportion of unexploded bomb accidents. Development experts have long recognized the links between unexploded bomb contamination and poverty levels in Laos.

Further to the link between contamination and poverty, experts agree that vulnerable populations remain disproportionately affected by the legacy of conflict in the region, with women bearing significant burdens posed by contamination. Women affected by contamination take on more responsibilities caring for survivors of accidents, and they adopt an economic burden if male heads of household are injured or killed. As of 2018, Laos ranked 118th in the global gender inequality index, representing significant gaps in gender equity when compared to other countries in the region, including Vietnam (ranked 58th), and Thailand (ranked 70th).

Mines Advisory Group (MAG) has been working in Laos since 1994, clearing the land of dangerous explosives and training and supporting local community members to reclaim their land and rebuild their communities. To date in 2020, MAG in Laos has cleared over 16,000 acres of land and destroyed a total of 14,006 items of explosive ordnance. There are currently 16 all-female demining teams in Laos, and MAG's full staff in Laos is 36 percent female. Laos currently has the highest proportion of female staff from all of MAG's clearance programs around the world.

Employing women in Laos and giving them the agency that comes with a head-of-household salary is a key priority for MAG, as is ensuring that female team members come from communities that are contaminated with unexploded ordnance. With the support of the United Nations, the organization has been able to identify specific barriers to employment for women and work to overcome them as part of the organization's strategic initiatives.

In Laos, women are less likely than men to have a driving license, and there is a perception that women are lacking in the strength and technical knowledge to control the large vehicles needed for clearance work. Women are also most often the primary caretaker for children and the elderly – which limits their access to education and employment opportunities. The vast majority of women in operational roles with MAG are either young women who have not had children or older women whose children have grown up. Women in senior roles do not seek promotion because it is not culturally acceptable for women to leave their families to pursue a career. Mines

Advisory Group is currently working closely with United Nations Women to build women's leadership in the unexploded ordnance sector.

MAG's objective in Laos is to save lives and build safer futures by supporting local men and women working to clear the land of unexploded ordnance, and to support the transformation of gender norms in all aspects of operational work and enable greater diversity and inclusion for both staff and beneficiaries. In order to achieve these objectives, MAG works closely alongside partner organizations ARTICLE22 and Legacies of War to deliver a comprehensive model that supports women working across all facets of community development and rebuilding.

Legacies of War is the leading international educational and advocacy organization working to address the impact of conflict in Laos during the Vietnam War era, including the removal of unexploded ordnance and survivor assistance. Since the founding of Legacies of War in 2004, U.S. funding to clear unexploded ordnance from Laos and help survivors has increased from \$1.3 million in 2004 to \$40 million in 2020, the highest funding level in history.

In addition to the advocacy efforts of Legacies of War on Capitol Hill, the organization also hosts a monthly public program series, which aims to educate the American public, encourage healing through conversations, and inspire hope through advocacy. Programs feature topics ranging from war trauma, veteran stories of reconciliation, and the ongoing clearance efforts of deminers like Mines Advisory Group. The programs also urge participants to continue to engage with their congressional leaders in advocating for clearance efforts.

With the support of 500,000 Laotian-Americans, Legacies of War was able to activate those in key congressional districts and garner support for the historic Legacies of War and Unexploded Ordnance Removal Act, which was introduced into Congress by Senator Tammy Baldwin in September 2020. If approved, this landmark funding of \$500 million over five years will be used by MAG and other delivery partners to conduct key clearance initiatives.

Using design as a tool for development, ARTICLE22 is a fashion social enterprise that brings local craft innovation to the global market in the form of jewelry upcycled by artisans in Laos from Vietnam War shrapnel and other scrap. Approximately 70 percent of ARTICLE22 artisans are women.

Named after and guided by the ethos of Article 22 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ARTICLE22 is a sustainable brand of jewelry that makes tangible impact in four ways: Environmentally; through upcycling shrapnel and scrap, which when sold as a finished jewelry product, contributes partially to Mines Advisory Group for unexploded ordnance clearance operations in the region. Culturally; through capacity building upon local traditions to create products competitive in the global fashion market. Socially; through strengthening a local community economy of self-determined homeworkers that balance artisan work with farming and family life. Economically; through empowering artisans to set their own prices and hours, and ensuring that artisans earn a living wage in recognition of their skill sets, one that is currently five times the local minimum wage.

ARTICLE22 has built a sustainable supply chain such that the women who are directly affected by the legacy of war are agents of change, engaged as a critical part of the solution to healing the land to make it safe for current and future generations. The more jewelry that is sold, the more land is cleared.

ARTICLE22 jewelry has also evolved to become a canvas for contemporary conversations, engraving the messages of global leaders into jewelry, calling customers into action to act as advocates. ARTICLE22 and Legacies of War work

hand-in-hand to develop calls to action on issues in Laos, engaging a new generation of supporters to take up this work.

Women in Laos face a unique burden of running households, leading agricultural activities for livelihoods, and protecting themselves and their families from the dangers of unexploded ordnance. Mines Advisory Group, Legacies of War, and ARTICLE22 believe that through advocacy, clearance, and artisan innovation, women in Laos can lift themselves and their families out of the fear that remains from the conflict, and build peaceful communities where everyone can thrive.

This three-way partnership is in the spirit of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to take a cross-sector, public-private approach to a critical development issue. The partnership remains committed to identifying and including additional stakeholders to achieve the ambitious goal of a future Laos that is free from the dangers of unexploded ordnance, where women have equal employment opportunities, and where communities are leading the way forward in their development goals.

The global community must continue to support and uplift women facing conflict and the task of rebuilding. Mines Advisory Group, Legacies of War, and ARTICLE22 applaud the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women for convening leaders in the sector to discuss these important issues.
