News



A female deminer carries out a search for unexploded ordnance in an abandoned garden in Cam Lo, Quang Tri province, Vietnam, on Aug. 28. (NCR photo)

by Reporter in Vietnam

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Every morning at 4 a.m., Mary Huynh rises in her modest home, prepares a meal for her family, spends a few moments praying, and then rides her motorbike to work.

Her workplace is not an office or factory floor, but a minefield left behind by the Vietnam War (1955-1975).

Dressed in a sand-colored protective uniform, wide-brimmed hat and high boots, Huynh slowly sweeps her metal detector over a field marked with bamboo stakes and red tape. Each sound from the detector could mean life or death.

"This work doesn't allow for any mistakes. If we make one, we pay with our lives," she said.

Huynh works in central Vietnam's Quang Tri province, once one of the fiercest battlefields of the Vietnam War. The land beneath her feet still hides a deadly legacy of unexploded ordnance.

For the Catholic mother of two, each day's task is both perilous and sacred. "Before I enter a minefield, I whisper an Our Father, three Hail Marys, and a prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking for protection for myself and my teammates," she said.



Female deminers are reminded about safety regulations before working on minefields in Quang Tri province on Sept. 17. (NCR photo)

Moments later, her face then softens into a smile. "But we feel joy when we uncover an explosive, remove it safely, and return the land to people so they can farm again."

Huynh knows the risks better than most. Two of her relatives were killed or maimed by bombs buried in the soil.

"Every day, local people live under the shadow of death because of these weapons," she said.

Quang Tri, where Huynh grew up, remains the most contaminated place in the Southeast Asian country.

With a population of about 642,000 and an area of about 4,700 square kilometers, about 80% of its land is contaminated by explosives. The neighboring province of Quang Binh, which also has a high rate of mine contamination, was merged with Quang Tri province in July 2025.

Government statistics said over the past half-century, leftover bombs and mines have killed more than 3,300 people and injured over 5,200. Nearly a third of the victims have been children, many of whom mistook cluster bomblets for toys. Almost half of all accidents occurred while farmers worked in their fields.



Deminers load a bomb onto a truck for transport to a designated disposal site on Aug. 28. (NCR photo)

Since 1996, local authorities have pioneered cooperation with international organizations to remove ordnance and clear land. According to the newspaper Tin Tuc Va Dan Toc, to date, dozens of countries and nongovernment organizations have provided financial and technical support, with the U.S. contributing the most — around $105 million.

International organizations such as Norwegian People's Aid, Mines Advisory Group and PeaceTrees Vietnam have maintained teams of around 1,000 staff across the province. With the help of their combined efforts, more than 37,000 hectares (91,390 acres) of land have been cleared, and more than 830,000 explosive items safely destroyed, according to Thanh Nien.

Yet millions more remain.

Huynh joined Norwegian People's Aid in 2018 and is a member of a clearance team of nine men and three women.

Her colleague, Nguyen, said that Quang Tri currently has 48 mine-clearing staff, 17 of whom are women ages 21-45. One team is entirely female, with 12 members. Some of the women even directly transport large bombs to be disposed of elsewhere.

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"Most of us chose this job after witnessing ordnance cause casualties among our relatives and local people. Others initially did it just to make a living but then became committed because they recognized the meaning of the work," Nguyen said.

Their work is demanding: six days a week, six hours a day under the scorching sun. New recruits must undergo five weeks of technical training, followed by annual refresher courses.

"This job is dangerous because we face death," the mother of one said, adding that five people have been injured and had to leave the job. In 2016, a team leader was killed while surveying for cluster bombs. Afterward, his son and daughter-in-law followed in his footsteps, determined to clear the bombs to reduce civilian casualties.

Nguyen said that on average, one hectare of land (2.47 acres) in Quang Tri is contaminated with up to 22 pieces of ordnance, such as 200-kilogram (about 440-pound) MK-82 bombs or cluster bombs, as well as anti-tank mines, grenades and artillery shells.

"We clear the surface down to at least 30 centimeters [about 12 inches], and in some places, we have to dig more than 2 meters [about 78.7 inches] deep to retrieve ordnance, ensuring people can farm and children have a safe place to play," she said.



A soldier applies cement over the surface of a playground at a school in Cam Lo, Quang Tri province, just one week after an unexploded shell was safely removed from the site. (NCR photo)

The work is painstaking, but its fruits are tangible. Cleared land is handed to local authorities and people for farming, housing, schools and roads.

For farmer Luu Thi Phu, 47, clearance was life-changing. After two cluster bombs exploded in her field, killing two buffalo, she abandoned her hectare of land. When it was finally cleared in 2018, she planted bananas and sugarcane, earning an annual income of over 100 million dong (about $4,000).

"We are grateful to the clearance teams who revived the 'dead land,' " Phu said. "Now we can farm and build homes without worrying about bombs and mines."

For Huynh, the risks are daily and real. She recalls lying on the ground for hours to defuse a live artillery shell, every movement precise and deliberate. Another time, she unknowingly stepped on an anti-tank mine during a break.

"I made the sign of the cross to regain my composure," she said. "Luckily, that type of mine only explodes under the weight of a tank. It's an experience I'll never forget."

Her Catholic faith anchors her. "I feel I need to contribute my small part to clear bombs and mines and bring safety to the people," she said.



Luu Thi Phu collects bananas on her farm on Aug. 28. The farm was cleared from unexploded ordnance in 2018. (NCR photo)

Her colleague, former soldier Le, echoes that sense of vocation. Since joining in 2019, he has neutralized more than 400 explosive devices.

"We have to be absolutely focused, calm and careful. That's the key to safety," he said, adding that his wife often calls during the day to encourage him.

"I dream of a safe future, where our people no longer hear explosions and our homeland is completely free of bombs and mines."

The war's legacy is not only etched into the land but also in the bodies and memories of many people in Quang Tri.

In 1990, Ho Ruan lost a leg while scavenging scrap metal from a bomb. A fragment remains lodged in his hip, aching whenever the weather shifts. Now 53, Ruan survives on food assistance from his parish and neighbors.

Ruan, a father of three, said many innocent people like him have lost limbs to unexploded bombs and mines while trying to earn a living, becoming burdens to their families and communities. "The consequences of war," he said, “have scarred both the environment and people's lives for decades.”



Two farmers cultivate medicinal herbs on land cleared of bombs and mines in Quang Tri province on Sep. 18. (NCR photo)

Nguyen herself has lost five relatives to ordnance. Just last year, she said, a farmer discovered a rusted 105 mm (4.2 inch) shell weighing nearly 10 kilograms (22 pounds). Months later, an Indigenous Van Kieu child picked up a cluster bomblet, mistaking it for a toy. It exploded, injuring him and killing a cow.

"The threat from unexploded ordnance continues to cause silent deaths," she said. "Only when they are all removed can Quang Tri have a chance for sustainable development."

The Vietnam National Mine Action Center reported there are still around 800,000 tons of unexploded ordnance across the country, affecting as much as 5.6 million hectares (13.8 acres). Mines have caused over 40,000 deaths and 60,000 injuries for the past 50 years, according to the newspaper Nhan Dan.

For Nguyen and her colleagues, the mission is not only about making fields safe but also about sending a message to the world.

"We have to invest so much money, manpower, and time to clean up these weapons, even though the war ended 50 years ago," she said. "Please, let us all work together to prevent war."

Standing in a once-deadly field now planted with green shoots of sugarcane, Huynh echoes that hope.

"We want to help protect our people, so that no child grows up afraid of the soil beneath their feet," she says. "Our homeland deserves to be free from death."

Editor's note: This story was written by a reporter in Vietnam. The reporter's identity has been withheld for safety and security reasons. Several of those interviewed go by their family names (last name only) also to protect their identities.