

Statement by Thoummy Silamphan

Opening Ceremony, First Meeting of the State Parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, Vientiane, 9 November 2010

Venerable Monks.

Excellency Chommaly Sayasone, President of the Lao PDR.

Dear Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

My name is Thoummy. I am a cluster munition survivor. I am from Xiengkouang province, which is around 10 hours north of Vientiane by bus.

I am very pleased to see so many people today attending this important conference. I welcome all of you to my country.

I would like to tell you a little bit about my story. I had an accident in 1996, when I was 8 years old.

I went to collect bamboo after school, alone, with a spade in my hand. When I was digging for bamboo shoots, I heard my spade hit metal.

Before I knew what it was, I was already blown away. The blast was so loud that villagers at nearby rice fields came to see me immediately. They carried me home in an old sarong. My parents were very upset. They took me in a tuk tuk to the district hospital.

From there, I had to be transferred, because my injuries were so serious. Because I lived so far from the hospital, it took a long time before I was treated. I was unconscious the whole time.

I woke up the next day to find that I had lost my left hand. The shock sent me back into unconsciousness for another day. I stayed in the hospital for two months. After I left the hospital, it took a very long time to recover, not only physically but also mentally.

It was very difficult to motivate myself to go back to school. But I did it because I knew education was the key to making a living. I knew I was lucky to be able to continue my education, which is not the case for many people with disabilities.

I continued studying until college. At the same time I volunteered at the World Education office in Xiengkhouang. I was very fortunate to get a job with them after graduation. Since 2009 I have been working as project assistant in their UXO Survivor Assistance Programme. This has provided me great support as well.

My story is largely about good fortune: I survived the accident even though I had to travel far and for a long time to get medical treatment. I was able to get schooling because my disability did not require many special services. My education allowed me to volunteer and get a great job. I know this is not an opportunity all survivors in Laos have access to.

But I hope that the implementation of the Convention will mean many more people will have the same opportunities. I hope they don't have these opportunities just because of good luck, but also because of good laws and policies. I have met other people with disabilities that have found work, and they can contribute to their communities. But I know that many survivors do not have access to education and jobs and still don't feel included in society.

I hope the Convention changes that not only in the Lao PDR, but also in other affected countries. I also hope that there can soon be no new victims because the land is being cleared more quickly. I hope no one will ever use cluster munitions again, because it can only lead to the kind of suffering we have in Lao PDR.

In my job now, I help people understand the situation of UXO survivors in Laos. As a Ban Advocate, I help people understand the situation of survivors around the world. I strongly urge governments to join the Convention, and to implement the Vientiane Action Plan.

We need your cooperation, and for everyone to join together to help UXO victims rebuild their physical abilities, their lives, and their future.

I thank you for your attention.