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Boch Non

The Village of Many Widows

by Paul Giannone,
CARE

The dusty road passed through the village with little fanfare. A few bamboo huts were scattered atop the brown dry soil. The old woman sat on a flimsy lean-to built on the side of a small stilted bamboo hut. The lean-to protected her from the unmerciful heat of Cambodia. As we approached her, we pressed our hands together as if in prayer and bowed, the traditional Cambodian greeting. Through our interpreter we asked if we could ask her some questions about the village. She gestured for us to sit down on a raised bamboo mat at the back of the lean-to. Behind us sat another woman, who was probably in her late 20s but looked much older. Between her legs a small child of about five sat and rested. Soon another ancient one joined us. If you could count the lines on her face like a tree, I'm sure she would have been hundreds of years old. Her face said many things to me. The lines, the dry leathery look, the sad-happy smile, all told of years of hard work, poor harvests, bad weather and war. There was also strength, perseverance, dignity and the will to survive in the aura of this woman. Somehow she had managed, either by luck or skill, to survive the cruel game of life and death that had been Cambodia for over 20 years.

Our interest was mostly the location of mine fields and we asked if there were any around or if landmines were a problem. She indicated that there used to be many mine fields out there, but the Cambodian government had come and destroyed them. "Are people still hurt by landmines?" we queried. "Not recently," she explained, but added, "we know there are mines near the river where we get water and some of the wooded and hilly areas have mines in them. We are careful where we walk."

"What are your problems?" we pressed on. "Water is a problem. The river is three miles away. It's a long way for an old woman to fetch water for crops,

washing and cooking. And of course you do have to be careful of the mines. Sometimes I don't have enough water to clean myself or the children," she answered.

I asked where the men were and the ancient one told me that you could call Boch Non the "village of many widows." She went on to say that you might see some male children or teenagers, but most had been claimed by the wars.

For the week we spent driving around Battambang Province the pattern was almost the same. The area was former Khmer Rouge territory that was plunged from war to peace when the local Khmer Rouge leadership 'defected' to the government side. Displaced people, refugees and those living in towns rushed back to claim land for fear that others might homestead it. The idea of land ownership is a difficult one in the province. The Khmer Rouge destroyed all land records and deeds. Land is controlled by the government, the police, the military and people who seem to be homesteading.

Battambang Province has rich soil, precious gems and forests. The area once produced enough food to feed the entire country. Now the major harvest is landmines and unexploded munitions. But the province, now at peace, does provide opportunity. Villages are springing up wherever road improvements are made. People are homesteading regardless of the risk of landmines and buried bombs or the fact that there is no infrastructure to support them. Those that can't cope, and many can't, end up back in refugee camps or destitute in the larger cities.

Everywhere we went the story was the same. Moving back onto the land was risky, but the risk had to be taken. I witnessed huts being constructed on land that was marked by the now familiar red skull and cross bones signs stating in both English and Khmer "DANGER LANDMINES." The answers to

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our questions became repetitive: "We need water, we need agricultural support, health care, our children need to go to school." Like any disease, mines are a part of that harsh environment influencing all the other factors. Mines and unexploded bombs prohibit the digging of wells, the improvement of irrigation systems, the expansion of agricultural land. Schools and health centers cannot be built and if they could, getting to them might be a problem. In one area where there was a school, the children could not attend full time because they needed to haul water, navigating the mine fields as they went about their task.

The specter of mines seems to be everywhere. In one village, a woman told us a man had been killed by a mine that morning while searching for firewood in the hills. As she told us the story, a procession of people came by carrying a hastily made coffin with the latest mine victim in it. In another village, I spotted an anti-tank mine sitting on the floor of a hut. The device could certainly destroy the entire hut and everyone in it. When we asked the woman why she had such a device in her home, she said she did not know why it was there, her husband had brought it in. She did not know if it had been defused. Not wanting to touch the device for fear of setting it off, we strongly cautioned her to tell local demining teams about its location to have it removed.

It is not that the Cambodian Government and other international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in Battambang Province do not understand the situation. The Battambang Provincial Development Plan recognizes landmines as a major impediment to development. They have also recognized the fact that in order to tackle a problem of this magnitude, everyone has to be involved in the elimination of mines. Individuals, village, commune, district and provincial leadership as well as local and international NGOs and trained deminers must deal with this problem. The Battambang Provincial Rural Development Committee and the U.N.'s "Cambodia Area Rehabilitation & Regeneration Project" (CARERE) program strategy calls for a bottom-up approach that empowers people through village and commune development committees. These committees would not only plan to address the landmine problem, but would aid in peace building by allowing former warring factions to work together in prioritizing development projects to help bring this war-torn province back to productivity.

Currently the worldwide strategy for the total removal of landmines centers on the development of national Mine Action Centers (MACs). The majority of U.N. and governmental funding and equipment go toward these MACs and the strategy is valid. The size of the landmine problem in most countries is so great that the national governments must take the major role for landmine removal just like they take a major role for health care, education and social services. But as the MACs are gearing up to fight the big picture war on landmine removal, the clearance of roadways, government buildings and large barrier mine fields, smaller battles are being fought at the village level for survival. The need for grass roots sup-



A Cambodian field littered with landmines.
©/o ICRC/Paul Grabhorn

port in mine action and development has been recognized by international donors and while funding has been promised, mechanisms for the delivery of these funds have either not been established or are slow and cumbersome.

As development agencies such as CARE wait for the needed financial support to start integrated humanitarian mine-action programs that would not only address the safety and security issue, but deal with development and reconciliation, people in countries such as Cambodia, Angola, Bosnia and Afghanistan are being forced by external pressures to build villages on mine fields. Children do not go to school, villagers expose themselves for firewood and food and ancient widows sit in lean-tos pondering the past and worrying about the future. ■