

# Returning Life to Field and Forest: Mine Clearance by Villagers in Cambodia

**Despite the dangers, villagers often resort to clearing mine fields, especially when the use of valuable agricultural lands is at stake. This practice is a common topic for discussion in the demining community, although it is far from being resolved.**

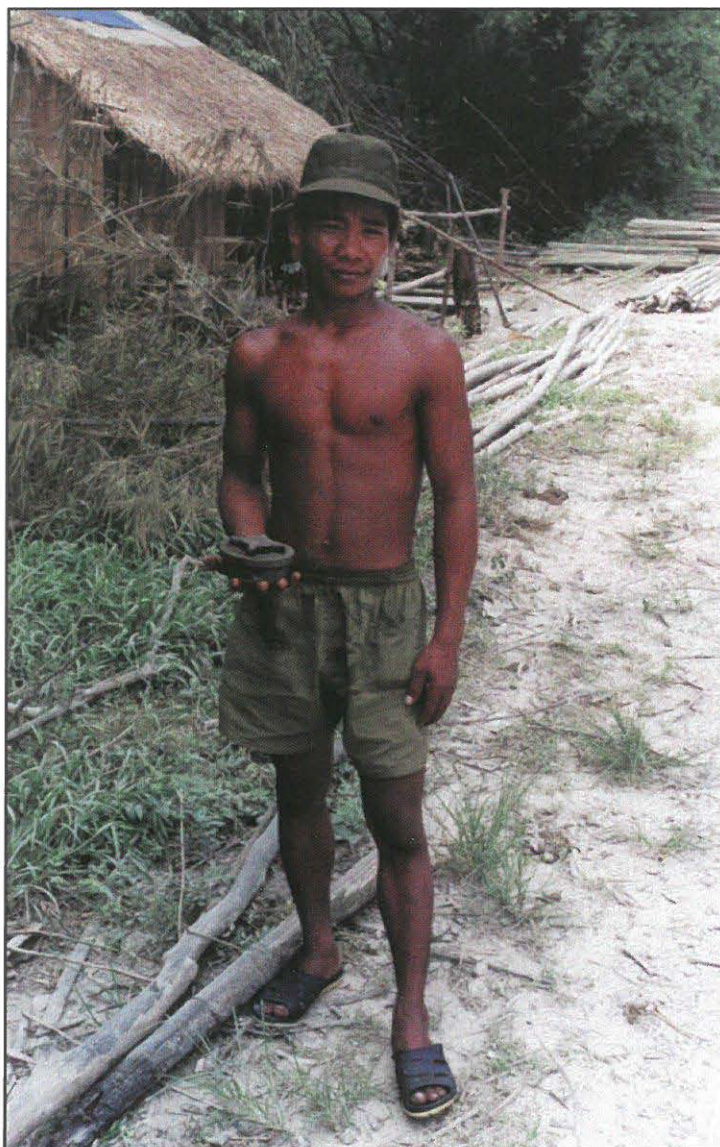
## Introduction

**P**rak Vann lives with his wife and young son at the edge of Sung One village in Samlot district, Battambang province, a former Khmer Rouge area in the northwest of Cambodia. Their wood and bamboo house sits on an 80 by 30 m plot of land provided by authorities. Assorted vegetables and fruit grow in the fertile soil. However, before Vann and his wife could begin to grow their crops or build their house, he had to clear the land of mines. It took him three months to clear away PMD-6 and M-14 mines using simple farming tools, such as a hoe and a knife. He also cleared the mines from the land where his mother-in-law now lives across the road. Vann has never been trained in mine clearance, although he served as a soldier with the Khmer Rouge for over 10 years, during which time he was assigned to lay and clear mines. He learned on the job. His left leg is amputated below the knee from a mine injury obtained during the war.

Vann's story is not unusual in Cambodia. Almost 30 years of conflict and insecurity have left Cambodia with a legacy of landmines and UXO throughout much of the countryside. The heaviest concentration of mined land is located in the north and northwest provinces along the Thai-Cambodian border where most of the fighting occurred. The provinces of Battambang and Banteay Meanchey are considered to be the most severely affected.

Since the 1993 elections in Cambodia, mine clearance has been undertaken by U.N. organizations, the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC), the military engineers of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and NGOs. However, these organized demining operations in Cambodia have not been able to keep pace with the need for land (Roberts & Williams, 1995:144), and relatively large sections of the population continue to live in areas affected by mines and UXO. The response of these communities has been to try to deal with the problem as best they can. One of the results of this response has been the occurrence of mine clearance activities by villagers themselves, a phenomenon that has been noted and documented to a limited extent since the early 1990s.

*By Ruth Bottomley, Research Coordinator, Spontaneous Demining Initiatives Study, Handicap International*



■ Village deminer holding a PMN-2 mine that he recently cleared from a path while harvesting bamboo. c/o HI-Belgium/Ruth Bottomley



### Informing the Debate

The fact that villagers are known to be involved in mine clearance activities has led to considerable debate among mine action practitioners in Cambodia as to how this issue should be addressed. Some argue that since this type of informal demining will occur regardless of the opinion of professional deminers, it would be better to give the village deminers training and equipment in order to minimize risk. Others believe that such programs would sanction activities that would not only be a risk to the village deminers, but would also be a risk to villagers who attempt to use the unsystematically cleared land (Roberts & Williams, 1995:145).

The 1999 *Landmine Monitor Report* provided astounding figures regarding mine clearance activities by villagers, drawn from the CMAC database. As of August 14, 1988, out of the total of 88,710,000 sq. m of land cleared by the different operators, local people were reported to have cleared approximately 79 percent (*Landmine Monitor Report*, 1999:402). This report was supplemented with figures from the Cambodian Mine Victim Information System, which was recording high casualty figures resulting from tampering with mines and UXO. The combined findings suggested that mine clearance by villagers, regardless of the initial debate, was continuing on a relatively large scale throughout Cambodia.

Since the early 1990s, Handicap International (HI) has been concerned about the practice of mine clearance by villagers and has been eager to learn about the issue in order to assess the viable solutions. HI stepped in to instigate a six-month research project to investigate the occurrence of mine clearance activities by villagers, or "Spontaneous Demining Initiatives." The research, which was conducted from July to December 2000, focused on the heavily mine-affected provinces in the northwest of Cambodia. The research aimed to assess the scope of mine clearance activities by villagers in Cambodia, the social and economic motivations that encourage the activity, the tools and techniques used and the quality and risk of the work. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the research team in the provinces of Battambang, Banteay Meanchey and Krong Pailin. Out of 45 villages, 94 village deminers were interviewed. Other key informants included village authorities, families of village deminers and general villagers. Although such small-scale, in-depth research does not allow for extrapolation beyond the sites surveyed, it does give an accurate picture of the affected area and allows for common trends to be drawn out of the case studies. To provide a complement and cross-check to the qualitative data collected through the in-depth interviews, a questionnaire was also devised and sent out to 12 provinces

with assistance from the Cambodian Red Cross data gatherers.

No easy or straightforward answers to the issue of mine clearance by villagers emerge from the research, and it is likely that the subject will continue to be hotly debated by those involved in the mine action sector. However, by allowing for a better understanding of mine clearance activities by villagers, the research findings may encourage a review of existing assumptions held by mine action practitioners and instigate renewed consideration of the subject.

### Demining for Survival

Village mine clearance activities are generally rational activities driven by livelihood needs. The extent of village demining activities largely depends on the availability of mine-free resources, alternative income-generation activities and, increasingly, alternative mine clearance capacity.

Villager livelihoods in rural Cambodia depend on agriculture, which is supplemented by secondary activities such as fishing or the collection of forest products, including bamboo, thatch, vines and vegetables. Mines often affect the villagers' access to these very resources. In most households in the northwest it is common for at least one member to be involved to some degree in an activity in a suspected mined area simply because there are few alternative ways to make a living. The vulnerability of people living in the northwest of Cambodia is increased because of the effects of long-term insecurity in the recent past. A large proportion of the population has been transitory due to the ongoing conflict, either as refugee populations, internally displaced persons or as military populations. They have few, if any, existing resources or support systems to draw on. The high population density in these border areas and the shortage of mine-free land, exacerbated by the increasing incidence of land grabbing by powerful people, means that many of these former transient populations are now settling in areas that contain landmines.

Alternative income-generation activities may help reduce community reliance on mine-affected resources. Some villagers living close to the Thai-Cambodian border have been drawn to this area for the very reason that alternative income-generation activities are possible, and many have been able to work as itinerant laborers in Thailand. However, such work is notoriously high-risk and insecure. Many have spent time in Thai prisons, and at other times border crossings are closed, cutting people off from this additional source of income and forcing them to turn to collection and foraging activities in mined areas.

Mine clearance activities by villagers in the northwest

are ultimately a strategic response to these environmental and economic conditions by a section of the population that has the ability to draw on existing knowledge and skills. The majority of village deminers are demobilized soldiers who learned the rudiments of mine clearance or mine breaching and defense tactics during their military service. However, there are also villagers who have no military background but will move mines out of their way. Demining is a necessary activity enabling villagers to support their families, often through the clearance or extension of farming land. It is also common for mines to be cleared on paths to common property resources such as forests, grazing lands and water sources, as these resources are often vital for subsistence livelihoods, particularly during lean periods when rice supplies are at their lowest. According to the findings of the research, village deminers generally clear mines for personal livelihood needs rather than as a means for alternative income. Relatively few village deminers were employed to clear mines from the land of other people, and fewer still were involved in the sale of mine or UXO parts for scrap metal or other uses.

### Priorities and Choice

Villagers often claim that they have to clear mines because they cannot wait for the mine clearance organizations to clear their land for them. The resources and capacity of organized mine clearance activities in Cambodia means that it is, and will remain, impossible for mine clearance professionals to respond to all the needs of rural villagers living in mined areas. Villagers may have to resort to clearing mines because they need to access land and resources in order to support their families. Limited alternative livelihood options present a decision over which they feel they have little choice. As the wife of a village deminer in Battambang province explained, "Today my family earns a living by doing farming. As far as risk is concerned, I think it is very dangerous for a man to work as a village deminer. But if my husband does not clear mines, my family will have no rice fields and we will have no way to make money to support the family." In terms of access to resources, families who have a household member capable of carrying out demining activities are perhaps at an advantage to those families who do not have this ability.

Village demining may still exist even where mine clearance is operating because the prioritization of the organized mine clearance does not match the priorities or expectations of the villagers. Clearance organization priorities include land for settlement and agriculture, but such is the extent of the demand that it cannot be realistically met. Often the village land that is cleared by mine clearance organizations is neutral community land

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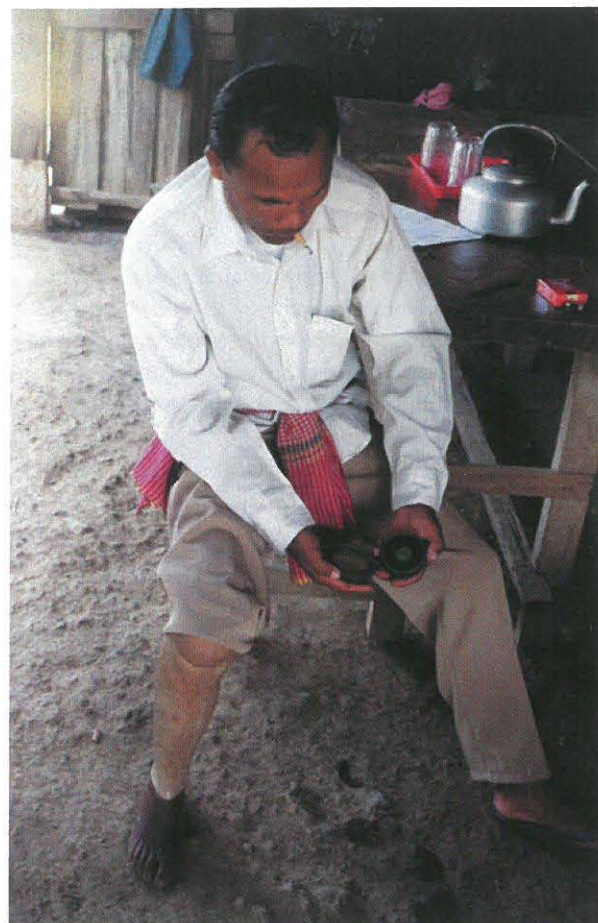
such as roads, school fields, watarams (land for the village temple) or land around pump wells. Although these areas are perceived useful as a whole to villagers, they do not respond to their individual livelihood requirements. Village deminers are able to clear agricultural land for their own individual needs and often help remove mines for others who want to access land for farming. Village deminers also clear land to access secondary resources or marginal lands, such as forests, bamboo groves or grazing lands, that are often vital to village subsistence livelihoods. Such areas are notoriously difficult to access by demining teams and are considered a lower priority in terms of cost effectiveness.

Similarly, mine awareness education often fails to address the underlying livelihood needs that drive people to clear mines by themselves. As Eaton, et al (1997:14) argue, if it is the very means of survival that are affected by mines "it is not tenable to assume that affected communities can be cautioned of the dangers and asked to await the arrival of mine clearance teams some subsequent years hence." Although mine awareness education can help promote safer behavior, it can never prevent villagers from entering suspect areas or from conducting high-risk demining activities if mines continue to be an impediment to their daily living. As a village deminer in Banteay Meanchey explained, "I participated in mine awareness education conducted by the organization. This has made me scared of digging the land and hitting mines accidentally. I also don't know where the mines are deep in the ground. However, I have no choice but to demine the land."



■ A field "deminced" and cultivated by a villager before official mine clearance, Banteay Meanchey province.  
c/o HI-Belgium/Ruth Bottomley





■ Village deminer demonstrating how he dismantles and neutralizes a Type 72A mine, Battambang province. c/o Hi-Belgium/ Ruth Bottomley

### The Safety Question

Humanitarian mine clearance organizations operating in Cambodia admit that they are unable to respond to the needs of all the people living in mine-contaminated areas. Villagers and local authorities often commented that they felt village deminers help make the village a safer place because they removed mines from their own land, public paths and tracks and assist other villagers, thus reducing the risk of accidents.

However, in terms of Western standards of humanitarian mine clearance, village mine clearance is a hazardous, high-risk and inadequate practice. Village mine clearance practices differ from professional demining practices in several pronounced ways. The most obvious difference is in terms of experience and training. Although the villagers may have years of military experience and knowledge regarding local mine deployment, most village deminers lack professional mine clearance training. This is reflected in their clearance methods, which, without doubt,

place the village deminer in situations of much higher risk than their professional counterparts would ever experience.

Unlike professional deminers, villagers generally clear the land where they suspect mines are present. Their mine location knowledge is based on visible mines, military experience or simply from observing accidents. In contrast to professional humanitarian mine clearance, which measures activity in terms of area cleared with as close to 100 percent safety as possible, the work of the village deminer is guided by a targeted approach with a higher mines-to-area ratio. Because access to resources takes priority over complete safety of land, relatively large areas of land will go unchecked by village deminers.

Professional deminers do not touch the mines if at all possible and prefer in-situ destruction. Village deminers tend to remove the mines from the ground using their hands. Their most common method of mine disposal involves burning the mine with firewood, although a large number of village deminers interviewed during the research said that they first neutralize the mines by dismantling them. They said that this helped make the mines easier to handle and reduced the impact of the explosion when the mines were burned.

However, it should also be recognized that, despite conducting a high-risk activity, the majority of village deminers do attempt to practice a certain degree of self-regulation to reduce the likelihood of injury both to themselves and to others. Village deminers frequently said that they would not clear mines if they were drunk or felt ill, and that they only clear devices they recognize and know they can dismantle and burn. If they are unable to remove or dismantle the mines, either because they are unfamiliar devices or the parts are rusty and unstable, they tend to burn them in-situ. Village deminers usually clear alone to prevent the risk of injury to other people and to avoid distractions, and cleared mines are frequently burned in the evening when other villagers have returned home. Such practices are still far from the international safety standards recognized for mine clearance and the risk undertaken by the village deminers remains high.

Most village deminers are under no delusion that the land they clear is 100 percent safe. Both they and other villagers realize that using the eye or a hoe to detect mines leaves mines in the ground. This realization is perhaps an important one in terms of accident reduction. People are still wary on land that has been demined by villagers, but the only way to test the safety of their land is to use it. After clearance, in general, villagers will initially cultivate their fields with spades, as it allows for more careful work. If no mines are found in consequent years, they will begin to use cattle or even a tractor to cultivate their land.

An awareness of mine clearance risks is also reflected by some village deminers who have attempted to adopt safer behavior in recent years. Several village deminers said that once they had cleared mines they would keep them for professional deminers to destroy rather than dismantling and burning them. Although village deminers realize they put themselves at risk, they feel they are more likely to be injured by unknowingly stepping on a mine than by demining. The paradox of this is that in order to clear mines, the village deminer has to enter suspected mined areas, thus increasing their likelihood of stepping on a mine.

Mine clearance is a coping strategy, but due to the high risk involved, most village deminers would prefer to stop clearing mines and have mine clearance organizations clear the land for them. A village deminer in Banteay

wider coping strategies of communities. Village mine clearance appears to highlight several inadequacies of professional demining in response to local-level priorities and need. The question is, *how can these needs be met more effectively and promptly?* More effective collaboration with ongoing community development initiatives could alleviate some of the economic and livelihood pressures forcing villagers into high-risk activities. At the same time, should it not be considered that the risks that are inevitably taken by these village deminers could be lessened through the promotion of safer practice? If the capacity of professional mine clearance is really such that the needs of those living in mined areas cannot be met, it is inevitable that village mine clearance will continue. ■

**“Village deminers frequently said that they would not clear mines if they were drunk or felt ill, and that they only clear devices they recognize and know they can dismantle and burn.”**

Meanchey province said, “I think that in the future I will get injured or killed and so now I stop demining and leave this work for the organization. If I continue to clear mines using only a hoe, I cannot escape from injury. Anyway, now I have enough land to provide for my family.”

### Conclusion

As stated earlier, there is no template answer to the question of villager demining activities. Mine action practitioners will continue to dispute the pros and cons of self-demining activities by villagers, but so long as villagers need to access resources and land and they have the basic knowledge and courage to carry out the activity, village demining will continue. The reality faced by villagers living with mines every day perhaps needs to counter the moral arguments of mine action in regards to the safety of the practice. The real issue is not one of village deminers versus professional deminers, but one of the need to free mine-contaminated land and resources for local community use.

Perhaps it is time for the mine action community to reassess the situation and learn from the village deminers' experiences, reasons for demining and needs. The actions of village deminers need to be seen as indicative of the

*\*The information presented in this paper draws on the findings of the Handicap International Research Study on Spontaneous Demining Initiatives. However, the opinions expressed in the text are the sole responsibility of the author.*

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