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Hero Profile: Aki Ra

by Meghan Wallace [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

The Khmer Rouge made Aki Ra a soldier when he was still a child. Now, close to 30 years later, he can be found working tirelessly to remove landmines and unexploded ordnance in Siem Reap, Cambodia—some planted by his own hands. As a result of his work, the Cambodia Landmine Relief Museum Facility houses thousands of detonated landmines and UXO, and provides a home for orphaned landmine victims. Aki Ra has received international recognition for his humanitarian efforts, including his recent selection as a Top 10 candidate for the CNN Hero of the Year award.



Aki Ra
Copyright 2006 Richard Fitoussi for Witness
Photographic

Aki Ra's statement, "My only goal in life is to make my country safe for my people," captures his unyielding commitment to peace. However, during the majority of his youth, Aki Ra only knew war, being conscripted first by the Khmer Rouge at around the age of 10, then the Vietnamese Army and finally the Royal Cambodian Army. As a child soldier, Aki Ra's orders frequently included laying landmines throughout Cambodia's countryside.¹ Following three decades of war, Cambodia continues to be one of the most landmine- and explosive remnants of war-affected countries in the world, with an estimated 7,300 mine/ERW casualties recorded between 1999 and 2008.² Additionally, Cambodia has one of the highest amputee ratios in the world, with a ratio of one amputee per 260 people.³

After spending most of his childhood and young adulthood with no option but to participate in the fighting or be killed, Aki Ra received training in demining and began working to clear the very landmines he had planted as a child soldier. Aki Ra also engaged fellow Cambodians in his mission, educating them on the dangers of landmines and UXO. Today, Aki Ra cares for child landmine victims, and with international assistance, has established the Cambodia Landmine Relief Museum Facility and the Cambodia Landmine Museum and Relief Fund.³

Life as a Child Soldier

Between 1975 and 1979, under the rule of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge forced Aki Ra and thousands of other Cambodian children to engage in warfare. Aki Ra estimates that his parents were killed by the Khmer Rouge when he was about 5 years old. A few years later he was drafted in the Khmer Rouge and forced to emplace

mines, fire guns and make bombs.¹ When Aki Ra was a teenager, the Vietnamese Army overthrew the village where he was staying, and he was forced to join them in fighting against the Khmer Rouge. Aki Ra stayed with the Vietnamese Army until it began to pull its troops from Cambodia in 1989, and he was conscripted once again—this time for the Royal Cambodian Army. “I had [bad] feelings, because sometimes we were fighting against our friends and relatives,” Aki Ra said of his war years. “I felt sad when I saw a lot of people were killed. A lot of people were suffering from landmines. [But] I did not know what to do, [because] we were under orders.”³

Training in Demining

In 1990, while working for the Royal Cambodian Army, Aki Ra attended school for the first time in his life. In 1991, U.N. peacekeeping forces arrived in Cambodia, and Aki Ra assisted them, learning to use detectors and other equipment to clear Cambodia’s scattered landmines.¹ Rather than becoming hardened by his war experiences, Aki Ra embraced the opportunity to use his training from the United Nations and his familiarity with weaponry to remove landmines and UXO and save lives. After the United Nations left Cambodia, Aki Ra continued applying his acquired skills to land clearance. However, lacking any specialized equipment, Aki Ra executed this task in an unconventional and life-threatening manner: He used his bare hands, a stick and a knife.⁴

Aki Ra later gained Accredited International De-mining Training and Explosive Ordnance Disposal certification at the International School for Security and Explosives, allowing him to establish his own demining team, Cambodia Self Help Demining, in 2008.⁵ Using International Mine Action Standards methods and equipment, he now trains and leads community-based demining teams to remove landmines.

Beginning of his Museum and Orphanage

Aki Ra started compiling a collection of detonated landmines and other weapons in a building in Siem Reap, which he referred to as his “museum.” At the museum, visitors learn about the destruction of war and pay a minimal entry fee to support his mine-removal mission. In addition to housing Aki Ra’s collection of decommissioned mines, bombs and other ERW, he displays his personal paintings, providing a visual representation of his own unique war experiences.¹ Furthermore, Aki Ra, along with his late wife, Hourt, who subsequently died from an illness when she was 28, began taking in orphaned landmine victims. Aki Ra feels he can relate to these children, having been orphaned as a young child himself. Commenting on his mission to assist children and his son Amatak, whose name means “forever,” Aki Ra states, “We must all do what we can to educate our children and make Cambodia a safe country again so that Amatak and all children can really live forever.”¹



A display at Aki Ra’s landmine museum.
Photo courtesy of Daniele Ressler

Establishment of Museum and NGO

Since the Cambodian government strictly advised against Aki Ra’s removal method due to its dangerous nature, he ran into frequent opposition regarding his museum. Fortunately in 2000, Canadian photojournalist Richard Fitoussi traveled to Cambodia to photograph and document the 25th anniversary of the Khmer Rouge. He met and accompanied Aki Ra in the field for 10 days, where he witnessed Aki Ra’s intuitive mine locating and clearance. However, Aki Ra did not declare any area as cleared, taking into account the possibility of remaining mines. Fitoussi estimates Aki Ra has recovered 50,000 landmines and other UXO throughout Cambodia, up to 150 weapons in a single day. Once Fitoussi completed footage for his documentary in March 2001, Aki Ra asked him for assistance in establishing a nongovernmental organization to meet regulations and obtain support for his work. Being unfamiliar with the procedure himself, Fitoussi went back to Canada and informed the board of directors about Aki Ra’s

request. Later that year, Fitoussi, in conjunction with Aki Ra, founded the Cambodia Land Mine Relief Museum and developed it over the next decade into what is now the Cambodia Land Mine Museum Relief Facility under the Cambodian Land Mine Museum and Relief Fund.

In 2003, the College of Architecture at Texas A&M designed and built a modern museum, a dormitory for the children



One of the displays at Aki Ra's museum.

Photo courtesy of Daniele Ressler

and a home for Aki Ra. The Cambodia Landmine Museum and Relief Facility publicly opened in 2007.³

Continued Success in Mine Action

Fitoussi says of the NGO's establishment, "There were lots of hoops to jump over to get where we are today. Aki Ra was somewhat of a maverick on his own, and we have come a long way... Aki Ra is a real testament of what can be accomplished if people work to make their country safe." His mission continues to gain momentum and growing support. The faculty of health sciences at the University of Sydney recently contributed to the construction of a physical rehabilitation center, which will provide occupational therapy services to landmine and UXO survivors. Also, a new building that can house an additional 30 children, which will double the number of children under the care of Aki Ra and his staff, will be completed in the near future with support from the Kindermissionwerk in Germany. Most recently, CNN

honored Aki Ra, the subject of Richard Fitoussi's upcoming documentary, "A Perfect Solider," with a nomination for the 2010 Hero award. He was quickly voted to the top 10. At the time of publishing, CNN had not yet selected its Hero of the Year, but the added publicity for this event is sure to bring additional recognition and donations to Aki Ra's work. ↴

This article was compiled by CISR staff member, Meghan Wallace. Contact her at [maic\(at\)jmu.edu](mailto:maic(at)jmu.edu).

Endnotes

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