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Cambodia

by Alex Davenport [Mine Action Information Center]



Plagued by nearly three decades of war, Cambodia remains one of the countries most afflicted by landmines and explosive remnants of war¹ despite its recent decline in mine/ERW victims.² There are nearly 14 million people³ living in Cambodia, and it is estimated that there are 43,316 survivors of landmines/unexploded ordnance who require assistance.²

Background

In 1863, Cambodia's king invited France to establish a protectorate over the country. France effectively ruled Cambodia for the next 90 years, leaving many of the institutions of day-to-day life in place, while installing French rubber plantations. Gradually, however, anti-French sentiment developed within the country. The slowly growing resistance ultimately led to Cambodian and Vietnamese communist guerrilla forces uniting to gain control of both countries in the period between 1946 and 1954. During this time, however, King Sihanouk negotiated Cambodia's independence from France, with a government recognized in the 1954 Geneva Accords⁴ despite the ongoing violence.

In the beginning of the Cold War during the late 1950s, the Cambodian government, led by Sihanouk, enjoyed diplomatic relations with the United States; in 1963 Sihanouk abandoned diplomacy with the United States and allied with North Vietnam. As conflict continued to intensify, Sihanouk allied once again with the United States, leading to a bombing campaign designed by the United States to purge Cambodia of Communist Vietnamese influence. This bombing ultimately led to the breakdown of governmental control and allowed various factions to assume power within Cambodia.⁴

Conflict continued throughout the 1960s and stretched into the 1990s until numerous parties signed accords in Paris to establish a U.N.-supervised transitional government that would work with Cambodian nationals to establish a self-governing body. Since the accords, however, the Cambodian government has

received decreasing amounts of foreign aid in its efforts to rebuild, and Cambodian politics have remained undemocratic.

Cambodia and the Ottawa Convention

Cambodia ratified the Ottawa Convention⁵ on 28 July 1999, and has been a State Party⁶ since 1 January 2000. Estimates regarding the extent of contaminated areas have sharply dropped since demining activities began in 1992. A current estimate notes 1,716.6 square miles (4,446 square kilometers) still affected; however, the likelihood that the Convention's Article 5⁷ deadline (1 January 2010) will be met is low. The government has been criticized as not being efficient in its demining efforts, and many agencies have proposed procedure changes.²

Furthermore, although government stockpiles were reportedly destroyed in February 1999, in accordance with Article 4⁸ of the Convention, the police and military continue to uncover stockpiles of mines and other weapons throughout other parts of the country. Local villagers also make an effort to collect and keep weapons they discover.²

Survivors in Cambodia

Cambodia is a country whose people are and continue to be devastated by mines and other ERW. Although there has been a decrease in casualties, there is roughly one mine/ERW survivor for every 350 people.² This rate of injury is alarming in and of itself, yet made even more so when, in many cases, Cambodian amputees are treated with disdain.⁹ The Cambodian government has, however, recognized the need to provide better assistance to survivors.² Cambodia, as one of the 24 neediest countries for victim-assistance,¹⁰ is making slow progress toward improved survivor assistance, and the availability of services is inadequate.² The health-care system utilizes health centers, referral hospitals and nationally based hospitals. This configuration causes problems for many of the survivors in rural areas because governmental and nongovernmental organizations operate mostly in urban areas; compounding matters is the fact that government assistance for survivors is not free and continuing care is expensive.²

Although first aid is generally available locally to victims of landmines and ERW, specialized care for most people requires traveling to distant locations. Still, there has been improvement as roughly 60 percent of new victims received aid within 30 minutes after the incident, reducing the fatality rate to about 14 percent in 2006.²

Psychological help is, in theory, available, yet this service is understaffed and underfunded. In response to these inadequacies, self-help groups have grown, some of which offer economic assistance, although most services like these are offered mainly by international organizations and NGOs.²

Finally, although the Cambodian government has stated objectives to meet victim-assistance needs, many of these goals are not specific enough, do not have assigned time frames, and/or are not measurable.²

Mine-risk Education Efforts

In contrast to survivor assistance, Cambodia's main strength lies in its approach to mine-risk education. Cambodia possesses a large MRE capacity; however, fewer people received MRE in 2006 than in 2005, due to a focus on at-risk areas within the country. Although the programs reached fewer people, the number of mines/ERW reported and destroyed increased. Furthermore, according to the 2007 *Landmine Monitor Report*, one study found that mine-risk education was also linked to a substantial decrease in casualties, with 40 percent of those surveyed stating that MRE was the second most significant factor in

the reduction of casualties after clearance.²

Mine-risk education in Cambodia is supported by several organizations, both state-affiliated as well as international organizations and NGOs—the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports; the Cambodian Mine Action Centre; the Cambodian Red Cross; the Cambodian Mine/UXO Victim Information System; The HALO Trust; Mines Advisory Group; World Vision; Spirit of Soccer and UNICEF. This support significantly aided Cambodia's MRE capacity, with the organizations training 66,177 MRE volunteers. Notable in this figure are the 6,000 teachers who taught MRE, along with the 19,041 students who gave instruction to children who were out of school, as well as their own parents. Although the MRE program in Cambodia has been largely successful, the need for continued support persists.

Conclusion

Cambodia is still a country in dire need of victim-assistance services. The governmental health-care system is, in many ways, ill-equipped to assist survivors of mine/ERW incidents, and there is a heavy reliance upon international organizations and NGOs. However, there is hope. Cambodia has an MRE system that has been revised to focus on at-risk groups and has subsequently achieved significant results. The MRE program provides evidence that if the government recognizes and acts on the need for increased victim-assistance services, then future VA efforts can be fruitful. 📌

Biography



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Endnotes

1. **Editor's Note:** Some organizations consider mines and ERW to be two separate entities, since they are regulated by different legal documents (the former by the Ottawa Convention and Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the latter by CCW Protocol V). However, since mines are explosive devices that have similar effects to other ERW and it is often impossible to separate the two during clearance operations, some in the community have adopted a "working definition" (as opposed to a legal one) of ERW in which it is a blanket term that includes mines, UXO, abandoned explosive ordnance and other explosive devices.
2. "Cambodia." *Landmine Monitor Report 2007*. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2007/cambodia.html>. Accessed 4 February 2008.
3. "Cambodia." *The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html>. Accessed 2 February 2008.
4. "Country History." *Cambodia e-Gov*. Royal Government of Cambodia. <http://www.cambodia.gov.kh/unisq11/egov/english/country.history.html>. Accessed 2 February 2008.
5. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*, Oslo, Norway. 18 September 1997. <http://www.icbl.org/treaty/text/english>. Accessed 20 March, 2008. The document was opened for signature in Ottawa, Canada, 3 December 1997, commonly known as the Ottawa Convention.
6. States Parties are those countries that have ratified the Ottawa Convention.
7. Article 5 of the Ottawa Convention requires that signatories identify all mined or mine-suspected areas; ensure these areas are marked, monitored and protected to protect civilians; and destroy or ensure destruction of all mines in these areas as soon as possible and no later than 10 years after the Convention's entry into force. The Ottawa Convention is available at <http://www.icbl.org/treaty/text/english>. Accessed 10 July 2008.
8. Article 4 of the Ottawa Convention requires each signatory to "destroy or ensure the destruction of all stockpiled mines it owns or possesses, or that are under its jurisdiction or control, as soon as possible but not later than

four years after the entry into force of this Convention for that State Party." The Ottawa Convention is available at <http://www.icbl.org/treaty/text/english>. Accessed 10 July 2008.

9. Hughes, Stuart. "Cambodia's Landmine Victims." *BBC News*. 11 November 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3259891.stm>. Accessed 1 February 2007.
10. Cambodia was identified as one of the 24 States Parties with "the greatest responsibility to act, but also the greatest needs and expectations for assistance" at the First Review Conference in Nairobi in 2004, and thus is committed to fulfilling the victim assistance objectives of the Nairobi Action Plan 2005-2009. For more information the Nairobi Action Plan, please visit http://www.gichd.ch/fileadmin/pdf/mbc/MSP/6MSP/Nairobi_Action_Plan.pdf.

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