

What Ever Happened to...?

This article covers the activities of the Japan Alliance for Humanitarian Demining Support in Thailand, and can be seen as a sequel to the article, "They Started With a Temple," found in Issue 7.2 of the Journal of Mine Action¹ which described the expansion of JAHDS from a small, research-based nongovernmental organization into a capable, effective mine-clearance nongovernmental organization in Thailand. Things have changed since then, and this article gives the rest of the story.

JAHDS in Thailand
by Paddy Blagden [International Mine Action]

The idea of forming the Japan Alliance for Humanitarian Demining Support was conceived by Hiroshi Tomita in November 1992 when it was discovered that a ground-penetrating radar tool developed by his company, Geo Search, which was used for the detection of sinkholes under roads in Japan, could detect an anti-personnel mine in a sandbox. This discovery started a period of research that led to the development of a mine-detecting GPR tool called Mine Eye. Since Geo Search was too small a company to fund a large-scale development programme, Tomita recruited the moral and practical support of major industrial companies operating in Japan such as Toyota, Honda, IBM, Omron and Secom Co. to help with development.

Practical Experience Needed for Product Improvements

JAHDS was founded as a nonprofit NGO to support mine action in March 1998 and donated funds and equipment to existing mine-action NGOs. In return, the NGOs were asked to assist in Mine Eye development by providing access to minefields and trials reports, but such support was difficult to obtain.

Consequently in January 2001, JAHDS set up its own small mine-clearance team, preferring to work in Thailand. It created a clearance team in alliance with the General Chartchai Choonhavan Foundation, a Thai NGO. Since the border demarcation adjacent to the Preah Vihear (Khao Phra Viharn) temple area was still contested by Thailand and Cambodia, the first demining task JAHDS undertook was at Sadok Kok Tom, another temple near the main road between Thailand and the Angkor Wat complex in Siem Riep, a main artery between Thailand and Cambodia. This site was identified by Norwegian People's Aid in 1991 as being of high priority for clearance, and this was endorsed by both the Thailand Mine Action Center and provincial authorities. Clearance began in December 2002 and was JAHDS' first demining experience. It was carried out successfully and without incident.

JAHDS Makes Use of Clearance Skills

After the successful clearance of the temple at Sadok Kok Tom, the situation at Preah Vihear was sufficiently resolved for JAHDS to work there. The JAHDS demining team reformed itself, splitting off from the GCCF, and recruited another group of deminers from the Kantharalak district of Srisaket province. These deminers underwent a six-week basic course at the Thai Army Engineer School in Ratchaburi province and were then added to a field team by Johan van Zyl, an experienced mine-clearance manager who had also trained the deminers at Sadok Kok Tom.

The new team set up camp on Khao Phra Viharn, part of the land belonging to the Thailand Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plants Conservation (DNP) in the Kantharalak district of Srisaket province, near the famous temple of Preah Vihear on the other side of the Cambodian border. It began clearance work on ground known to be contaminated with mines and unexploded ordnance. The DNP needed the land for the development of a cultural heritage site, camping ground and educational facility, all connected with the temple and its construction.

Built circa 900 A.D., the temple is 900 metres (984 yards) in length and sits atop a cliff with a sheer drop of about 400 metres (437 yards) on three sides. The temple itself lies in Cambodian territory, but the easiest access is from Thailand because in many places the cliff forms the national frontier between Thailand and Cambodia. The site is usually open from the Thai side because the temple is a candidate to become a UNESCO World Heritage site.²

Mines and UXO were placed at the site when the border area was contested from 1983–1998. The temple is not far from Pol Pot's former headquarters. The Thai Army, Vietnamese Army, Khmer Rouge,³ Cambodian Army and some irregular militias fought over the area, leaving behind many mines. A number of army or militia camps were set up, and some local valleys were used for rifle- and rocket-propelled-grenade-firing practice, which left an abundance of scrap metal and some UXO. There were also bounding and fragmentation mines and at least one artillery shell rigged as a trip-wire booby-trap.



The JAHDS demining team.
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF P. BLAGDEN

From an operational point of view, the clearance was fairly straightforward, although the majority of the area was thickly covered with trees, bushes and tall grass. There were rocky outcrops and steep slopes that made manual clearance very difficult. The area was divided into blocks, and each block was cleared in accordance with priorities determined by the DNP. One of these blocks surrounded an old reservoir, dating from the same period as the temple, with an earthen dam at one end.

The clearance was initially managed by van Zyl, and later supervised by Yutaka Koike, aided by Raungrit Luanthaisong, Tripop Trimakka, and Commander Rabiab Maneerat. They had a team of 24 deminers and five surveyors. Introduced to integrated demining by van Zyl at Sadok Kok Tom, the JAHDS team made extensive use of handheld grass-cutters, a Hitachi vegetation cutter and a Bozena 4 flail.⁴ In addition to their clearance duties, JAHDS staff carried out mine-risk education in local schools and communities, which was effective, and soon the MRE was passed to the locals by deminers from their own communities.

The area cleared was 668,000 square metres (165 acres) and, although there were some difficulties due to delays of UXO demolition, the work proceeded on schedule. Quality Assurance was carried out by the Thailand Mine Action Center, but the DNP was confident enough with the clearance that redevelopment of each site began as soon as JAHDS left the block. It was heartening to see how quickly previously-mined areas were developed for civilian purposes.

JAHDS also funded the building of a perimeter-safety barrier beside a walkway near the cliff edge. The view over Cambodia from this walk is breathtaking, but the cliff is almost vertical at this point, and there was a need to prevent people from falling off.

...And They Finished with a Temple

Despite its successful demining experience, JAHDS ceased operating as an NGO at the end of October 2006. The decision to fold was mainly due to the difficulty of obtaining sufficient funding (close to US\$1.8 million annually) from corporations and private donors in Japan. Thailand is seldom seen by international donors as an underdeveloped country, mainly because foreign visitors see only major cities like Bangkok or the well-developed tourist resorts on Phuket Island. Much of the funding provided for the clearance of Sadok Kok Tom and Khao Phra Viharn National Park came from pri-



The summit of the temple, overlooking Cambodia.

vate Japanese donors, but the burden of seeking such donations became too high for the small group of enthusiasts involved.

Future Plans

Although JAHDS' NGO operations have ceased, it is expected that the mine-clearance capacity it created will not. A Thai civilian NGO called the Peace Road Organisation will continue the project. The JAHDS Board donated all funds and equipment to the new NGO in November 2006, allowing the group to carry out further clearance for the development of this important sector of DNP lands. It could also be highly important for the economy of the local area, especially if a new road is constructed linking Preah Vihear with the complex of temples at Angkor Wat, expanding the "temple circuit" and increasing the number of visitors to this important cultural area. This road would also be a commercial artery because a border market would likely establish itself, further enhancing the economy of the area. In addition, mine clearance would further remove the hazard of mines for villagers who harvest the local forests for timber and roof grass. Construction of the road is expected to be completed by September 2007.

Above all, the skills JAHDS transferred to local deminers could be used as the nucleus for a larger Thai NGO, established in accordance with the latest TMAC mine-action programme, and supplementing the work of the TMAC Humanitarian Mine Action Units. There is still much clearance work to be done along the border and this extra clearance capacity is sorely needed.

In Summary

The Japan Alliance for Humanitarian Demining Support had six years as a research

and development NGO for GPR mine detectors and nearly two years as a mine- and UXO-clearance NGO in Thailand. Of the clearance teams, it could fairly be said, "They started with a temple, and they finished with a temple." It was a short life perhaps, but a good one. ♦

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Paddy Blagden started demining in 1991. The United Nations recruited him in 1992 and he joined the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (which eventually became the United Nations Mine Action Service). Blagden also helped start the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining in 1997 and later served as its Technical Director until June 2002. He began working with the organisation that became JAHDS in 1992. His company, International Mine Action, is a consultancy; he now works for a number of organisations, mostly carrying out programme evaluations.

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