

Cambodia

by Elizabeth Wise and Daniele Ressler [Mine Action Information Center]



Graphic courtesy of MAIC

Cambodia is one of the countries most heavily contaminated with mines and unexploded ordnance, a result of nearly three decades of conflict. The nation was occupied by the Japanese during World War II, and through the 1960s and 1970s Cambodia was involved in the Indochina Wars, seeing significant bombing. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge occupied Phnom Penh, taking over every town and city; they were not entirely removed from Cambodia until 1999. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978 displaced the Khmer Rouge; the Vietnamese occupied Cambodia for 10 years, which invoked almost 13 years of civil war.¹ Pol Pot, leader of the Khmer Rouge, found landmines so effective at causing fear and death that he called them his "perfect soldiers."²

Landmines and Unexploded Ordnance

Cambodia signed the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention³ on December 3, 1997 and ratified it July 28, 1999.⁴ It entered into force January 1, 2000. The Cambodian government also instituted legislation on May 28, 1999 to prohibit the use of anti-personnel mines.

A Landmine Impact Survey conducted in 2002 found 6,422 villages still affected by landmines/UXO, covering approximately 4,466 square kilometers (1,724 square miles).⁵ Eighty percent of Cambodia's 13 million residents survive through farming. Due to the impact of landmine and unexploded ordnance, 22 percent of Cambodia's villages do not have enough agricultural land, 14 percent have suffered livestock losses and 12 percent have difficulty accessing water.⁵

In 2005, 60 percent of the casualties from landmines occurred while the victims were engaged in daily activities such as farming, herding, clearing land, fishing, or collecting food and wood, or while traveling (18 percent).⁶ Meanwhile, 57 percent of the casualties from UXO were caused by tampering with the ordnance.⁶ In general, UXO and abandoned explosive ordnance pose a greater threat than landmines to civilians in Cambodia.⁶

As of April 2006 the number of people killed, injured or disabled due to landmines and UXO since 1979 reached 62,638.⁶ In 2005, 875 new landmine/UXO casualties were reported, a slight decrease from 2004.⁶ Encouragingly, in 2006, casualties from landmines and UXO dropped sharply by over 50 percent to 440.⁷ The sharp drop in casualties is attributed to a number of factors: improved mine-risk education methodologies; better job opportunities and favorable agricultural production rates, which leads to a decreased need for civilian expansion into new (mined) land; stricter scrap-metal trade regulations;

degradation of mines through age and environment; and recent government policy on land administration.⁷

Clearance and Mine-action Progress

In 2006 over 35 square kilometers (13.5 square miles) of priority mined land were cleared by the three humanitarian demining operators--Cambodian Mine Action Centre, Mines Advisory Group and HALO Trust.⁷ CMAC is the main national operator for clearance in Cambodia and cleared over 50 percent of the land prioritized in 2006 for demining. In addition, the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces cleared over 16 square kilometers (6.2 square miles) of lower-priority mined land in support of road reconstruction and development, irrigation development, railway reconstruction, and border demarcation projects.⁷ In total these four operators cleared nearly 51.9 square kilometers (20 square miles) of land in 2006. This represents a 28-percent increase in the amount of land cleared during the same period in 2005.⁷

Besides an increase in clearance and decrease in casualties during 2006, Cambodia has seen several exciting areas of progress related to the Cambodian Mine Action Authority.⁸ The CMAA, which is Cambodia's national mine-action coordinating agency, organized five Mine Action Coordination Committee meetings in 2006 that successfully focused on strengthening the provincial mine-action planning mechanism.⁷ The CMAA initiated a comprehensive licensing and accreditation process for mine/UXO clearance operators in Cambodia, trained two new teams to conduct quality assurance on clearance operations and approved six new Cambodian Mine Action Standards.^{7, 8} Additionally, an Area Reduction Policy was overwhelmingly adopted. Considered a "big leap forward," the policy directs the re-classifying and releasing of previously suspected lands for productive use by civilians.^{7, 8} CMAA also developed a Mine Risk Education Strategic Plan, an Explosive Remnants of War Strategic Plan, and Policy and Operational Guidelines for Socio-economic Management of Mine Clearance Operations--all of which will inform future policy and planning in Cambodian mine action.^{7, 8}

Another new effort implemented by the Commissariat General of National Police in 2006 was the organizing of national police into networks that collect and report information on UXO presence in communities. From the start of this initiative in June 2006 until the end of the year, 65,415 items of UXO were reported to police through this program and referred to operators for destruction.⁷

Mine-risk Education

Since late 2003, CMAA has taken the responsibility of coordinating all MRE initiatives with the support of UNICEF. In 2006 there were eight organizations implementing MRE in Cambodia, mostly in the high-risk northwest provinces.⁷ During the 2006 reporting period, 649,679 people received MRE.⁷

The Cambodian Mine Action Centre leads some particularly innovative safety initiatives--the Mine/UXO Risk Education and Reduction teams and the Community-Based Mine/UXO Risk Reduction programs. The MRER teams are mobile mine-awareness teams that move to different villages and provide both MRE and limited mine/UXO clearance functions.⁷ The CBMRR/CBURR programs encourage community-based risk education by mobilizing local people in target areas to establish mine or UXO committees. These committees increase awareness of the risks of landmines and UXO and help individuals become more proactive about their own safety and the safety of their families and communities. They also support clearance/explosive-ordnance-disposal teams in locating mines and UXO.^{7, 9, 10}

Survivor Assistance

Cambodia does not yet have legislation to protect the rights of disabled persons; however, such legislation has been drafted, has passed through the first stages of approval and is under discussion by the Council of Ministers.⁸ At this time the 45,000 recorded landmine survivors face considerable social, economic and employment discrimination. Cambodia is one of the States Parties to the Ottawa Convention with the greatest needs and responsibilities for landmine survivors.

The Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority coordinates and monitors mine-victim assistance in Cambodia, delegating coordinating responsibilities to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour, Vocational Training, and Youth Rehabilitation as well as the Disability Action Council. More than 30 national and international organizations are working to aid landmine and UXO survivors in Cambodia. Although more and more first aid is becoming available at the village, commune and district levels, many victims require greater treatment, including surgeries.⁶

The International Committee of the Red Cross, American Red Cross, Cambodian Trust, Handicap International and Veterans International have all established or helped support rehabilitation centers and other related institutions.

Conclusion

Cambodia, with the aid of many national and international organizations, has made great strides in the removal and destruction of landmines and UXO and reducing casualties in 2006. With continued hard work and commitment to progressive programs and policies, it is hopeful that Cambodia will reach its 2012 "zero impact" goal, which entails clearance of all severe- and high-impact suspected mine areas, and developing intensive mine-risk education for all mine/UXO-suspected areas.¹¹

Biography



Elizabeth Wise was an Editorial Assistant with the *Journal of Mine Action* from May to August 2006. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English and currently attends James Madison University, where she is obtaining a Master of Arts in technical and scientific communication.



Daniele Ressler works as a Researcher, Writer and Assistant Editor for the *Journal of Mine Action*. She holds a Master of Science in violence, conflict and development studies from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. She has studied in Switzerland as well, earning a Certificate for Applied Studies in peacemaking. Daniele has previously worked in Washington, D.C., and Seattle, Washington, in the field of conflict management, and has lived in Nairobi, Kenya.

Endnotes

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