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The War Goes On

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reported by contracted village demining teams. These procedures include handover certification by commune and district officials; quality assurance with metal detectors in the presence of these officials and other community representatives; and ploughing of the newly cleared land before handing over.

During demining activities, both contracted village demining teams and the landowner described somewhat similar procedures. These procedures had been learned from employment in the armed forces and seemed to have been implemented in a disciplined manner. There have been no reported incidents during these demining activities.

The one accident reported seems to have occurred during what we would describe as sporadic, incrementa- 
tal and unplanned informal demining in contrast to the disciplined and carefully planned activities of the village demining team. It is in such situations that it is to be most expected that accidents are likely to occur.

Removal and destruction of mines/UXO discovered by community-based mine action initiatives is often by arrangement with “official” organizations. This arrangement promotes safety by reducing risk from tampering with stored mines/UXO and during destruction.

Tools used to assist mine/UXO detection and removal are very similar to those used by the “official” organizations, and this is not surprising as these organizations are often the source of the rented equipment. A significant difference is that each year more land is denied access to agricultural land has decreased by 58 percent, despite an increasing population.

Safety issues related to the cleared land after demining and also during the demining process are exemplary. There have been no reported mine-related incidents on land that has been cleared by community-based mine action initiatives. Only one accident has been reported during unplanned activities.

The sophistication of contracted group mine action is remarkable and the results are impressive. In one instance, a project for local community verifica- tion of clearance work has been developed. Although contracted mine clearance of this type may be unique in the province, it is possible for the first time to quantify the changes in mine-contaminated areas in Cambodia.

The analysis presented in this paper and our con- clusions are the opinions of the authors and do not nec- essarily present the views of GeoSpatial International Inc., the government of Cambodia, or GeoSpatial International Inc., based in Victoria, Canada, has worked on various contracts in Cambodia with the GeoSpatial International Development Agency since 2000.

By developing mine risk education and training materials specific to re- gions and countries, the Golden West Humanitarian Foundation tries to help prevent landmine casualties. Yet deaths and injuries from human interactions with explosive remnants of war continue to occur for many reasons.

M. Le Phi, 48, was killed instantly and his daughter seriously injured in June 2005 when, according to Clear Path International and Vietnamese officials, an 81-millimeter (3-inch) mortar exploded in Hoc Khong commune of Hue city in central Vietnam. Le Phi, an ice-cream vendor and part- time scrap collector, was at home removing the explosive charge from the mortar with a large knife when the deto- nation occurred. His 16-year-old daughter was injured by mortar fragments while cleaning vegetables nearby.

Many believe 30 years of humanitarian demining efforts have drastically reduced threats to Vietnamese civilians from explosive remnants of war like the mortar projectile that killed Le Phi. The reality is that in many places in Southeast Asia, ERW casualties seem to be growing instead of decreasing due to population pressures, modernization and globalization.

Since the end of the American war in 1975 and cessation of hostilities with China in 1979, a number of organizations have worked hard to reduce the threats of unexploded ordnance and landmines in Vietnam. In April 1975, the Vietnamese military conducted a concerted clearance effort to allow internally displaced people access to formerly contested areas. The Vietnamese demining organization, other military units, and a number of non-governmental and international organizations have been busy, especially in the central region of Vietnam. Despite all these efforts, deaths and injuries from human interactions with ERW continue to occur. Vietnam is known as one of the most contaminated nations in the world, with explosive residue from wars with France, America and China littering the land. At the same time, Vietnam is a growing, vibrant nation with an expanding economy and a determination to modernize its infrastructure.

Some of this infrastructure development is a proximate cause of increasing ERW victims. For example, there are several highway projects now allowing passage through previously inaccessible or underdeveloped areas along the Vietnamese-Laotian and Cambodian borders. The Ho Chi Minh National Highway follows the gener- al trace of the old wartime “Ho Chi Minh Trail” network. While most of the wartime trail was inside Laos or Cambodia, many branches led to remote ar- eas of Vietnam. Coincidentally, these were some of the most intensively bombed areas in the world during the 10 years of war with America. Another highway project, the Trans-Asia Highway, will eventually join Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand to other parts of Asia. This high- way will pass through some of the most contested areas of the Indochina wars. These projects are exposing thousands of construction work- ers to serious threats from unexpl
plowed aerial bombs and submunitions in their path. Use of large earth-moving machines, able to dig deep in the ground, can only compound the dangers from deeply buried—but still deadly—munitions.

Risk management can help workers avoid disaster, but the immediate danger pale next to the potential for long-term threats to the population. Highways are magnets for the region’s impoverished population. As highways are completed, people gravitate to them to service the needs of travelers for food, fuel, lodging and goods. New towns spring up where only jungle has been for millennia. Jungles still hold a variety of hazards, including poisonous snakes and deadly diseases such as malaria and Japanese encephalitis, as well as tons of unexploded munitions.

Poverty and global markets for scrap metal are major contributors to the problem but are not the only sources of ERW victims. Small submunitions, locally known as “bombies,” often appear rusted and too old to pose a danger, but the fuses in the center are well-protected and may only require a slight shock or jar to set them off. Children, even those who have received some sort of mine risk education, are often hurt or killed playing with these submunitions. Farmers find UXO while clearing land for agriculture, sometimes having buried munitions with tools or plows, and the results are deadly. These farmers often don’t know how to report the problem to obtain trained explosive ordnance disposal support, so they attempt to remove the items themselves. In other cases, they want the explosive to sell for illegal mining on the metal to sell as scrap.

Scrap collection is a growing problem because the price of metal dealers will pay continues to rise. Much of the easily collected scrap has already been found, so collectors are driven to more remote areas, often into former battlefields where ERW are most common. Landmines may still pose a hazard around former military positions. Scrap dealers distribute metal detectors, often homemade, to encourage people to search for metal to sell. Frequently, the metal objects they find turn out to be deadly unexploded munitions.

During the war, some Vietnamese specialized in salvaging explosives from UXO to use in constructing booby traps or other improved explosive devices. It is now illegal to possess landmines in Vietnam, but a market remains, and some of the old skills survive. Unfortunately, many of those who seek to remove the explosives—whether to make the metal projective safe to sell for scrap or to re-cover explosives for other uses—do not have the requisite experience. Many others simply cannot distinguish the dangerous items from common scrap.

This situation is not unique to Vietnam, but exists in many nations Cambodia and around the world. One of the challenges has been access to quality, accurate, educational materials that, with technical information oriented to the specific hazards encountered by specific countries. Within Vietnam, several organizations, most notably the United States Department of State, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, PeaceTrees Vietnam, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and several others, have worked hard, assisting the Vietnamese with training and equipment to clear mines and UXO, conducting studies and surveys to help identify the extent of the problem, and providing education on ERW risks.

The Golden West Humanitarian Foundation has responded to situations similar to Vietnam by developing a Landmine Indicators Program to assist mine risk education efforts. This program educates local people on ERW hazards by producing educational materials using local language terms and photos of mines and UXO in realistic local settings. People at the village level learn to recognize not only mines and UXO, but other indicators of ERW dangers.

These indicators may be as obvious as obscured or damaged minefield signs or improved local warning signals (painted rocks or sticks, etc.), or less obvious ones such as military vehicles destroyed by mines. Overgrown roads, trails or agricultural land may show that there are mines or other dangers keeping people away. Old trench lines, collapsed defensive positions and rusted barbed wire indicate a former military position. Patterns of large craters may demonstrate an old bombing strike and the potential for UXO.

The Golden West Humanitarian Foundation, a U.S. 501 (c)(3) nonprofit, was created in 1998 to help support organizations, charities and other non-governmental organizations involved in landmine clearance and explosive ordnance disposal operations. There are many organizations that have a great desire to eliminate mines and other ERW, but often they don’t have the required technical knowledge. The Golden West founders recognized this fact and organized an international network of military and civilian ordnance experts, chemists, trainers and technologists all sharing the same objective: find the ways and means to improve support to the field. The Golden West Landmine/ERW Indicators Program has been applied with great success in Azerbaijan, Mozambique, Angola and most recently in Cambodia. Golden West produced over 13,000 copies of ERW media for the Cambodian Mine Action Center, funded by the U.S. Department of State.

Golden West recognizes the potential for thousands of new ERW victims in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and is doing something about it. Applying Golden West technical and operational expertise via strategic partnerships with other national and non-governmental mine and UXO action agencies is not a total solution but rather a good start on an old problem. More accurate reports make the EOD response process faster and safer.

Golden West supports the work of the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) in Cambodia and the Cambodian Mine Action Foundation (CMAF) in Vietnam. CMAC’s and CMAF’s mine action efforts are tailored for landmines and UXO threats commonly found in their countries.

What makes Golden West ERW educational products unique is the signal effort made to identify the specific indicators to help identify the recognizable hazards of casualties in a particular region. “One size fits all” approaches have been less than successful in other places because different regions frequently pose completely different hazards. For example, in Cambodia, landmines pose the greatest hazard in the western border areas with Thailand. Eastern borders with Vietnam and Laos have a much higher incidence of aerial bombs and other air-dropped munitions and surface UXO, and this area has fewer landmines. Golden West ERW Indicators education materials are custom-designed to highlight the local hazards in realistic settings. Villagers recognize the items causing the majority of casualties faster and safer.

Another benefit of the Golden West approach is the Indicators Program produces materials that can be used to train local explosive ordnance disposal operators. In many places, shortages of technical materials and training aid growing to EOD make training difficult. Not only do the photos and drawings aid identification of munitions, but other technical information provided is useful in day-to-day operations.

The newest Cambodian ERW package is designed to assist the expansion of CMAC EOD teams into the eastern provinces of Cambodia. Finally, the innovative Golden West reporting system makes it simple for people to notify authorities when a dangerous item is found. The shapes of dangerous munitions are depicted with numbers and letters allowing easy reference for accurate reporting. More accurate reports make the EOD response process faster and safer.