

# Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

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Volume 9  
Issue 2 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 40

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February 2006

## Cambodia

Country Profile

*Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)*

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### Recommended Citation

Profile, Country (2006) "Cambodia," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 40.  
Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol9/iss2/40>

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## Cambodia

Updated Wednesday, 18-Sep-2013 10:44:26 EDT

**By: Erin Herring, *Mine Action Information Center***

Cambodia's population, like the populations of all its surrounding nations, suffers from a war-plagued history. Since Cambodia's involvement in the Indochina War in the 1960s, landmines have been a constant threat to civilians. During the Vietnam War period in the late 1960s and 1970s, North Vietnam laid landmines near Cambodia's borders and the United States dropped bombs, even in central provinces.<sup>1</sup> Because of Cambodia's 30-year history of conflict with Thailand, northern provinces Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey and Battambang are among the worst unexploded ordnance- and landmine-affected areas in the world. So many landmines were laid on the Cambodia-Thailand border during the 1970s that the Cambodian Mine Action Centre refers to this as a period when the nation essentially became a "prison without walls."<sup>1</sup>

Though Cambodia's internal conflict and conflict with neighboring nations have resulted in heavy contamination, it is useless to attempt to place blame on any single party. In July 1997, Cambodia signed the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention,<sup>2</sup> joining Thailand (its only acceding neighbor) in becoming one of the leading supporters of the policy.<sup>3</sup> For the last several years, the Royal Government of Cambodia has focused largely on rebuilding the previously obliterated economy by maintaining peace, rehabilitating formerly displaced citizens and attempting to reduce poverty.<sup>4</sup>

### Implications for Civilians

Because Cambodia's landmine problem exists primarily in rural and mountainous areas, farmers are most devastated by the land contamination. Many of the affected areas are neither marked nor fenced; poor farmers are often unaware of their daily risk. In many areas, war has destroyed the farmers' systems of irrigation, but because of UXO and landmines, new irrigation systems are difficult and risky to rebuild.

Since a shortage of funds limits much of the demining required to redevelop irrigation systems, some farmers can only yield crops during the wet season, while others have no way of managing excess water on the flood plains during the flood season.<sup>4</sup> At least 80 percent of the country's people are farmers, many of whom are affected by the ominous landmine presence in some way; therefore, the Royal Government of Cambodia now considers mine action to be a high priority.<sup>1</sup>

Given the lost potential for much of the land due to heavy mine contamination, village populations migrate into cities, increasing "squatter" populations in urban areas. This population is largely comprised of "returned refugees, war widows, orphans, ... disabled people affected by wars and landmines, ... [and] victims of natural disasters."<sup>4</sup> Dense city populations perpetuate unsanitary conditions, the spread of disease and overcrowding.

Finding funds for both victim assistance and demining in Cambodia is problematic because money from short-term or one-time donations runs out quickly; demining requires multi-year investments from benefactors in order to make large-scale changes. Planning for a vast and complicated demining effort requires long-term support the Cambodian Mine Action Centre does not have.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Southeast Asian Rural Development Fund, pursuit of "free donations" to mine victims is futile because the benefits are only temporary. Instead, organizations like SEARDF propose to invest funds in



"restoring the life potentials for landmine victims."<sup>4</sup> SEARDF asserts that to sustain a heightened standard of living, victims need to be equipped with resources that promote self-sufficiency. Education and hard work are two missions several non-governmental organizations endorse, seeking to provide the tools that will help victims rise from poverty.<sup>4</sup>

The primary method for instituting much-needed change in the mine-affected population is through the CMAC Mine Awareness Education programs, which began in 1993. The initial focus was to educate people who began to resettle unknowingly on contaminated areas after the conflicts. The CMAC Mine Awareness Education programs seek people in high-risk villages and rural areas to help them avoid UXO and landmine contact and teach them what to do when accidents occur. Frequent contact with local people allows the mine awareness teams to serve as liaisons, directing demining efforts in the communities that need attention.

### **Clearance and Detection Progress**

Over the last decade, demining has been prioritized based on the locations of the highest casualty rates in Cambodia. Casualty reduction was the primary focus of the Emergency Phase from 1992 to 1998. Since 1998, Cambodia has entered into the Development Phase, in which the Cambodian Mine Action Centre communicates with locals to assess which areas will benefit the most socio-economically from demining.<sup>1</sup>

The Japanese Alliance for Humanitarian Demining Support initially launched a mine-detection tool called the Mine Eye in Cambodia in 1997. The prototype detected several types of mines in its initial field tests that such equipment had never before been able to identify.<sup>6</sup> This development created opportunities for new demining projects all over Asia, including Cambodia.

### **Conclusion**

Cambodia's people remember a history of strife and oppression. War is still vivid in their memories and evident in Cambodia's desolate minefields and wounded social infrastructure. Cambodia is recovering, though. The Royal Government of Cambodia is aware of the devastation inflicted on its people and has taken steps to respond. Though conditions are still difficult, relief for Cambodia is only a matter of time.

### **Endnotes**

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### **Contact Information**

Erin Herring  
Mine Action Information Center  
E-mail: [maic@jmu.edu](mailto:maic@jmu.edu)