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Thailand

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By: Erin Herring, *Mine Action Information Center*

History

Landmines exist in Thailand as hazardous reminders of past conflicts. With five affected areas in the country, over half of Thailand's mine accidents have occurred along its border with Cambodia. In fact, the Thailand Landmine Impact Survey estimates the country has 297 mine-impacted communities with 473 mined areas covering just less than 2,000 square kilometers (about 1,243 square miles). The Thai-Cambodian border has a particularly high concentration of mines because of its history of conflict. The northern Thai-Laotian border contains 90 mine-impacted communities, the western Thai-Burmese border has 139, and the southwestern Thai-Malaysian border contains only four. There is also one small area south of the border with Laos that has mines remaining from the communist insurgency about 25 years ago.¹ The Thailand LIS, completed in 2001, concluded it was at least 95-percent accurate in its estimates.²

On December 3, 1997, the Kingdom of Thailand signed the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention,³ and a year later was the first country in Asia to ratify it.⁴ Because of this bold initiative, Thailand has become a leading advocate for mine-ban efforts, including extensive involvement in international conferences, supporting pro-ban policies and campaigning for mine action.

Today, Thailand conducts its own mine action program through the Thailand Mine Action Centre and four demining units, with human resources provided by the Thai army. In the past, several donors, including the United States, Japan, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, supported capacity development and other projects by the United Nations Development Programme.

Implications for Civilians

The mines that exist along the Thai borders, laid for defensive purposes, are among the most difficult type to demine. Often with plastic casings and low metal content, many mines were laid as "nuisance minefields," randomly placed in smaller groups in forested areas to prevent people from using the land or to defend small battle areas, as opposed to large patterned minefields used to defend larger areas from attack. Landmines now primarily affect civilians who unknowingly enter contaminated areas out of necessity—that is, for hunting, food-gathering and other activities.² In fact, civilian tragedy vividly colors a portrait of the Thai people who live near the contaminated areas.

Mines prevent necessary development in rural areas. The danger of landmines, marked or unmarked, threatens mostly the poor, who have no choice but to enter unsafe areas to generate income. Eliminating landmines is a matter of some urgency in order to mend a war-torn area and reduce past conflicts' effects on civilians and their posterity. At this point, who laid the mines is irrelevant; the urgent issue is demining,¹ which would allow much-needed economic recovery to proceed.

In 2002, the Japanese government initiated a project to remedy the threat of landmine accidents by approaching it as both a cultural and a socio-economic issue. As a part of its ongoing Grant Assistance for Grassroots Projects scheme, Japan announced a grant designated to support "various socio-economic development projects which



are proposed by NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and a variety of local groups and authorities in Thailand."⁵

The grant also funds projects ranging from vocational education to endow those in mine-affected areas with income-generating skills to purchasing more sophisticated mine-detecting equipment. Such equipment includes the "Mine Eye," a lightweight sensor that can analyze the shape, position, and depth and material of buried objects.⁶ Small-scale grassroots projects aiming to improve agriculture are continually developing as a way to equip these farmers to work safely and effectively.⁵

The General Chatichai Choonhavan Foundation, an organization working on Thai mine action efforts, is currently negotiating with the Japanese government to fund landmine clearance activities, and is reportedly coming close to acquiring 45 metal detectors for civilian demining use.

The Role of UNDP

UNDP works to develop the national capacity of countries to handle their mine and unexploded ordnance problems themselves through mine action laws, institutions and human resource development. It also encourages national ownership of the mine action program. The UNDP approach stresses the importance of countries employing their own nationals wherever possible to manage mine action, as opposed to assigning such jobs to expatriates. The UNDP Regional Center in Bangkok currently supports national programs through country offices, including those countries in transition between U.N.-managed and UNDP-supported national programs. The Regional Center will continue to respond to requests from the Country Office for support to address the mine action and developmental needs of the country.

In September 2005, Thailand's Mahidol University hosted and delivered the UNDP-sponsored mine action middle-management course in Bangkok, training 20 participants from 15 countries.

Conclusion

Since the Vietnam War, the wide usage of undetectable landmines has made Thailand's borders essentially uninhabitable minefields. These indiscriminate weapons inhibit socio-economic growth and development for the Thai people in and around contaminated areas. Thailand's future brightened after it signed the Ottawa Convention in 1997, with promising opportunities for demining, socio-economic development and international involvement in similar efforts. These recent developments will someday create a safe and self-sufficient Thailand.

Endnotes

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Contact Information

Erin Herring

Mine Action Information Center

E-mail: maic@jmu.edu

Chip Bowness

UNDP Bureau of Crisis Prevention and Recovery Mine Action Team

Mine Action Advisor Asia

Regional Centre in Bangkok

Box 1608

New York, NY 10163-1608

USA

Tel: +66 2 288 2605

E-mail: chip.bowness@undp.org

Web site: <http://regionalcentrebangkok.undp.or.th/>