

# Thailand: The Land of Smiles (Until you take your first step)

**The remnants of conflicts along the Thai-Cambodian, Lao, Malaysian and Myanmar borders affect the livelihood of about 400,000 residents. The Thailand Mine Action Center looks to reverse 40 years-worth of landmine contamination.**

By Dave McCracken,  
TMAC Mine Action Technical Advisor

## Four Borders in Conflict

The four borders of Thailand have been prey to perpetual conflict, leaving a legacy of shattered limbs and lives. Landmines have been planted in Thailand over the past 40 years by both conventional and guerilla armies. Some combatants are long forgotten, but the morbid legacy of landmines remains where the mines were left years ago to defend borders, depopulate areas and deny the use of infrastructure, including roads and bridges, resulting in unusable land.

Initial surveys made by the Royal Thai Army and Navy in 1998 indicated that approximately 796 square kilometers of land is unusable, thus affecting the livelihood of 400,000 residents. Mine-infested land includes villages, agricultural lands and parts of national forests. Of these mined areas, there are 532 sq. km on the Thai-Cambodian border, 124 sq. km on the Thai-Lao border, 53 sq. km on the Thai-Myanmar border, and 87 sq. km on the Thai-Malaysian border.

The exact number of mines in Thailand is unknown. Moreover, information on areas suspected to be contaminated is dated and lacks accuracy, although the duration of several conflicts indicates that contamination could be severe in some areas. In order to quantify Thailand's mine problem, the National Mine Action Committee commissioned a Level One General Impact Survey in the late-1990s through the support of Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States and the United

Nations. Preliminary survey reports by expert witnesses indicate that as many as 35 provinces are mine affected.

## Cambodian Border

From 1979 to 1998, the Thai-Cambodian border was an arena for intense conflict. The combatants used landmines as a weapon of choice for denying access and preventing the movement of people in and out of Cambodia. The Cambodian Peoples' Armed Forces and the supporting Vietnamese Army developed special units to lay mines under the K-5 Operations Plan. The K-5 code name became synonymous with the entire border area with Thailand, focusing on the use of landmines to interdict Cambodian resistance groups entering Cambodia from Thailand.

Initially, Cambodian troops mined all of their country's border passes or ingress routes, as well as general border areas, as a protective measure. In the process, these troops often strayed unknowingly into Thai territory to plant mines along the perceived border. In response, Cambodian resistance groups would plant mines as a protective measure around Thai sanctuaries. The net result was numerous groups laying landmines for different purposes, thus compounding contamination over a prolonged conflict period. The O'Smach border area served as a prime example of the effect of mined border area on civilians. Fighting in this area in May 1998 resulted in a high level of mine contamination and significant casualties among refugees attempting to flee across the border. Thai medical facilities along the border continue to provide assistance to Cambodian landmine victims seeking emergency medical attention.

## Laos Border

A long insurgency conflict was waged along the Laos border between the Thai Communist Party (TCP) and the Royal Thai Army. Landmines and booby-traps were used as principle weapons by both sides. The conflict started in

1964 when the TCP began operations in northern Thailand, Khun Nam Chan Village, Borklua District, and Nan province. The insurgencies expanded into Nakorn Phanom province and, in 1965, open warfare between government forces and the guerilla movement began. The conflict expanded to include border provinces of Chiang Rai, Payao, Nan, Uttaradit, and Phitsanulok.

The act of warfare in Laos included laying landmines in border passages to restrict movement and as protection around guerilla and government military bases. Tactically important features such as dominant hills were also a focal point of the fighting. Military conflict continued with considerable intensity from 1968 to 1989.

Thai-Laos border units are currently cooperating to demarcate the border. This operation has resulted in 425 km of previously disputed border areas being marked as delineated. Unfortunately, the survey teams have suffered mine casualties during this operation.

## Malaysian Border

Conflict along the Thai-Malaysian border between the British/Malaysian military forces and the Communist Party of Malaysia (CPM) began in the 1950s, ending in 1989. The CPM considered mines an important part of its strategy. It used factory-manufactured mines and locally produced, improvised mines/booby-traps to support its operations. Both British/Malaysian and CPM forces used mines to protect units operating in border areas in Sonkhla and Yala provinces. These operations included the protection of patrol and staging bases for counter insurgency and guerilla operations. Mine laying activities by all parties peaked during the mid-1970s and early 1980s.

The CPM also established tunneled base areas in remote jungles along the border. These areas were inaccessible by road when initially established. Infrastructure development in past years, including road construction in these remote areas, has brought the population in contact with mined areas.

The CPM ceased hostilities in 1989, formally signing a treaty. The use of landmines has ceased on both sides of the border since implementation of the peace treaty. The CPM has claimed that most of the landmines and booby-traps were removed in the 1980s. However, landmine accidents continue to occur in border areas.

## Myanmar (Burma) Border

In 1945, Burma gained independence from the British government. However, in 1948 minority groups claimed independence from the central Burmese government and set up resistance groups. Fighting among resistance groups

and the Myanmar government continues today in border areas, frequently spilling over into Thai territory. Currently, the federal government's State Law Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military units are engaged in an ongoing conflict with minority groups. The intensity of this conflict significantly changed in 1995 when some of the minority groups joined with the government and increased military activities. Meanwhile, there have been frequent clashes in the border areas opposite Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, Tak, Mae Hong Song, and Chiang Mai provinces.

As in other border countries, mines produced in Myanmar are used to deny access to both border passes and residential areas. With military conflicts raging on, high numbers of ethnic minorities are fleeing for sanctuary in Thailand. Many of these refugees, along with animals such as elephants, have become casualties of mines laid by Myanmar government forces to interdict ethnic minority guerilla groups. In addition, mines and improvised devices are causing casualties in Thai agricultural areas, seriously affecting farming communities.

The conflict along the Myanmar border will continue for the foreseeable future as mine laying has increased. A record of the past and present mine situation is needed to ensure that these hazardous areas are identified for future humanitarian clearance operations.

## Mine Action in Thailand

The combination of terrain and mine threats challenge mine action efforts in Thailand, especially with the country's combination of three-canopy jungles, mountains, laterite soils, the monsoon season, and a host of tropical diseases. The scattering of low-metal content AP pressure mines over a 30-year period also provide for a very dangerous environment for mine clearance operations. The solution to these situations is integration of the latest technology and techniques to safely deploy deminers and equipment.

The Royal Thai Army and Navy began demining border areas in 1987. Field units clear an average of 2,500 to 3,000 mines each year along all four borders. The First Army's Burapha Field Force (responsible for the security in Sa Keao province) is making one such effort. About 63 sq. km of Sa Keao are suspected to be mine-infested. From 1994-99, a total of 2,837 landmines (including AT mines, AP mines, and UXO) were cleared and destroyed by the Burapha Field Force in both general EOD and small clearance tasks, which are normally conducted using tactical methods.

The Royal Thai Government (RTG) recognizes that landmines are and will continue to be a major obstacle to development and economic growth in rural border

■ Preah Vihear, a former battlefield on the Thai-Cambodian border.



communities. Thailand acknowledged the importance of the mine threat along its own borders by signing the Ottawa Convention on Dec. 3, 1997. The country has readily demonstrated its will to prohibit the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of AP mines, and to destroy all of its stockpiled AP mines. Thailand has also undertaken to identify, demarcate and destroy all AP mines in mined areas under its jurisdiction. On Nov. 27, 1998, Thailand deposited its ratification instrument at the United Nations, becoming the 53 nation, and the first in Southeast Asia, to ratify the Ottawa Convention.

### The National Mine Action Committee

In August 1998, an order from the Office of the Prime Minister of Thailand was issued forming the National Mine Action Committee (NMAC). The prime minister directs and chairs NMAC, which was formed to address landmine issues. NMAC membership consists of all major government ministries and departments of the RTG.

NMAC monitors the obligations set forth by the Ottawa Convention and develops policy for the monitoring of national strategic objectives, including:

- Implementing laws prohibiting the use of APLs;
- Overseeing demining operations;
- Establishing a minimum quantity of APLs in the country for the purpose of education and demining only;
- Coordinating overseas and international community support; and
- Disseminating information and providing assistance to the population and improving the environment for those people affected by APLs.

NMAC established the Thailand Mine Action Center (TMAC) on Jan. 18, 1999, in Don Muang, Bangkok. TMAC serves as the central control over all APL issues and operations in Thailand.

### TMAC

On Jan. 18, 2000, TMAC was officially declared a working facility under the authority of the Thai Supreme Command and with Royal Patronage provided by Her Royal Highness Galiyani. This unique bestowing of royal patronage demonstrates the level of commitment and concern the problem of landmines has stirred in the Thai people.

TMAC serves as the center for the full range of mine action issues in Thailand, including coordination with all international organizations and donors. TMAC operations encompass mine/UXO awareness, mine/UXO clearance,

mine/UXO survey, and victim assistance activities throughout Thailand. The mine action organization monitors the timelines set by the Ottawa Convention and has developed a mine action program to meet the convention obligations, including AP stockpile destruction. The first bulk demolition of 10,000 landmines occurred on May 1, 1999 at a military base in Lop Buri, Thailand, followed by a second bulk destruction on January 18, 2001 of 1,000 M14 AP Blast mines.

TMAC is responsible for preparing and coordinating the implementation of a national mine clearance plan. Thailand developed an initial "Master Plan on Humanitarian Mine Action of Thailand" for a four-year period (2000-2004). Seven Humanitarian Mine Action Units (HMAUs), each with 99 personnel, will be established along the problem borders. TMAC has trained personnel to work in the HMAUs. HMAU #1 HQ, which is partially supported by U.S. contributions to the FY2001 program, is deployed at Wattana Nakon, Sa Keow province. This demining unit includes a mine awareness team, technical survey team, mine detection dog (MDD) team, manual demining team and a mechanical assistance team. The units are stationed in Nong Ya Keaw village on the Thai-Cambodian border. The duties of each HMAU include local coordination of mine action activities such as public relations, mine awareness, information collection, technical survey and demining.

### Humanitarian Mine Action Funding

The funding for humanitarian mine action in Thailand has come from a number of international sources, as well as from within the country. The RTG passed a supplementary budget in March 2000 of 1.6 million Thai Baht (THB) (about U.S.\$32,000) to initiate mine action by HMAU #1 in Sa Keaw province. An additional 16.246 million THB (about U.S.\$325,000) was added to TMAC operational capacity for mine action efforts in July 2000. The total mine action budget allocation for FY2001 is 44 million THB (about U.S.\$880,000). In addition, the U.S. government has provided funding and support in:

- Infrastructure development and technical advisory support;
- training support;
- equipment acquisition and operational support;
- regional capacity development; and
- TMAC capacity training ("train the trainers" and mine detection dog team training)

U.S. mechanical assistance to demining (namely HMAU #1) support has been provided through the

deployment of two mechanical systems for trail evaluation: TEMPEST and SDTT (Survivable Demining Tractor and Tools). TEMPEST, a remote-controlled machine, clears vegetation in support of demining operations, while SDTT also clears vegetation, but requires "hands-on" control.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Center for Mine Action Technologies (CCMAT) will provide a BRM48 (PROMAC) for trail evaluation. The BRM48 is an attachment mounted on an armored tracked excavator. Canada will also contribute explosives that are specially designed for humanitarian demining operations, called FIXOR.

### Mine Awareness

TMAC recognizes that mine awareness is a priority for reducing the number of landmine/UXO accidents in Thailand. TMAC works closely with other organizations in developing accident-reducing, mine awareness curricula at both the local and national level. To date, a total of about 46,000 civilians in some 40 border-area villages have received mine awareness education from HMAU #1.

### Overview

There is a commonly held view of Thailand as a vacationer's haven with spectacular beaches, exotic animals, and Buddhist temples. All of these attractions can be found in Thailand. However, it is important to note that within a few hours driving distance, Thai people are living in mine-affected communities, watching neighbors lose life and limb. Thailand recognizes the importance of a strong commitment to ridding it self of landmines, teaching people to avoid landmines and in assisting mine victims.

Initial efforts by the RTG to mobilize its national assets for dealing with this problem are noteworthy. Scarce fiscal resources and technical challenges are clear indications that no poor country can handle mine problems alone. TMAC has started effective mine action coordination and operations. Although TMAC's efforts are modest in size compared to the mine problem, the mine action



■ (far left) TEMPEST operates in thick brush on the Thai-Cambodian border.

■ TEMPEST clears a lane. Ban Nong Ya Keaw village, Thai-Cambodian border.

### Other International Funding:

Norway U.S.\$320,000 (16 million THB)  
\*Level 1 Survey (TMAC)

United Kingdom U.S.\$400,000 (£273,000)  
\*Level 1 Survey (TMAC)

Japan U.S.\$400,000 (¥48 million)  
\*United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund

organization's work has formed a basis for future mine clearance and awareness efforts. Thailand faces decades of challenging work to rid landmines from its soil. All assistance to jumpstart this indigenous program is received with gratitude and enhances Thailand's determination to make strides in this long process. ■

### Contact Information

Dave McCracken  
Mine Action Technical Advisor, TMAC  
Phanpitt Court - Suite 616  
160 Piput Soi 2  
Silom Road  
Bangkok, Thailand 10500  
Tel: +66-1-805-8108  
Fax: +66-2-266-0279  
E-mail: [ubique@loxinfo.co.th](mailto:ubique@loxinfo.co.th)

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