

Mine Awareness



A CMAC entertainer plays a mine awareness song to a group of children using a "char pei"—a traditional musical instrument.

Photo c/o CMAC

by Tang Sun Hao,
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UXO Awareness Branch



A mine victim describes his
story to a CMAC MA Mass-
media officer.

Photo c/o CMAC

The mission of the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) Mine/UXO Awareness Branch is to reduce the mine/UXO casualty rates by educating people about the nature of the danger and the appropriate steps to avoid the risk of accidents. The primary objective of CMAC Mine/UXO Awareness is no longer to teach people about the presence and dangers of landmines and UXO, but rather, it is to ensure that people have the correct knowledge and make them more able and intent to avoid risk-behavior so they can reduce the risk for themselves. In Cambodia, most communities have knowledge, sometimes gained in a tragic way, about landmines.

People at risk cannot be allowed to be overwhelmed by fatalism or to exist under a sense that accidents cannot be prevented. They must be helped to understand the nature of the danger, how to iden-

at the Cambodian Mine Action Center

tify and avoid dangerous situations and to understand that they are truly the masters of their own destiny.

Mine incident statistics show that many accidents are caused when people step on mines they don't see. So, at first glance, mine/UXO awareness education may be a waste of time and money, though the situation is more complex. As survival needs force people to venture into risk environments, the cause of accidents is often a mixture of lack of knowledge, wrong knowledge and unavoidable risk-taking. Also, statistics and anecdotal evidence indicates that too often both adults and children are tampering with explosives that they know are dangerous. Thus, the target for CMAC Mine/UXO Awareness is to eliminate a number of undesired behaviors and attitudes, each of which may have multiple causes.

Mine/UXO awareness education is a necessary intervention, which attempts to enable and encourage people to co-exist safely with the danger. Though each single mine and UXO poses a risk until it has been physically removed, accidents are less likely to happen if people are provided with the knowledge and skills to avoid dangerous activities and situations and, maybe most important, strong intentions to act accordingly.

To be as effective as possible, CMAC systematically investigates the local mine/UXO situation before a Mine/UXO Awareness Team is deployed to a

target location. This practice enables the teams to tailor the education to be as relevant and useful as possible to the affected population.

A large portion of the population in Cambodia has co-existed with mines and UXO for decades. So most people have some knowledge about the nature of the danger. But often, this knowledge is wrong and must be corrected. The alarmingly high number of mine and UXO accidents proves that the population needs general education, special instructions and persuasion.

An Integrated Approach

Decades of research have proven that awareness campaigns that are combined with direct intervention are more likely to succeed than those that solely rely on information. For example, unlike an HIV-awareness campaign, in which condoms can be handed out, CMAC cannot hand out any prevention-tools against the danger posed by mines and UXO. But, in addition to the safety-instructions given by the MAT Teachers, CMAC has organized the Mine/UXO Awareness Program to work in close and mutual support of other mine action operations.



A child is called up to point out items learned during the mine awareness presentation.

Photo c/o CMAC

A CMAC mine awareness team teacher visits a target group of children in the rice fields.

Photo c/o CMAC



“Awareness campaigns often waste effort on providing information about a problem when what is really needed is instruction on how to deal with it.”

This organization functions as follows:

a) Mine/UXO Awareness cooperates with the Cambodian Red Cross and CMAC Databases to provide regularly updated mine/UXO incident figures so CMAC can plan operations according to its number one priority: land use for resettlement of refugees and IDPs and settled land with high casualty rates;

b) Mine/UXO Awareness gathers information from local communities about mine fields and UXO that poses a daily threat to people so that CMAC can take action where it is most urgently needed;

c) Mine/UXO Awareness educates local communities in conjunction with other mine action operations. In addition to giving awareness-education, they make sure that everyone understands what CMAC is or will be doing and how they can support this;

d) The Mass Media Campaign primarily aims to educate people about the nature of the danger of mines and the steps to avoid accidents, but it also explains about CMAC and CMAC operations;

e) Mine/UXO Awareness Billboards remind people what to do and to whom to report if mines/UXO are found or suspected; and

f) The NGO Campaign educates those who work in risk environments and works to build mutually beneficial relationships with NGOs working in the regions where people are at risk.

The Mine Awareness Teams

The objectives of the Mine/UXO Awareness Team Campaign are as stated:

- **Recognition:** People should be able to identify common types of landmines and UXO and know their consequences.

- **Avoidance:** People should understand that handling mines and UXO is unsafe. Only professional deminers can demine safely. People should understand that they should not for any reason touch or tamper with mines or UXO, they should not try to set off mines or UXO themselves and they should not go into known mined areas or areas where mines or UXO are thought to be found.

- **Warning:** People should understand the importance of warning their family, fellow villagers and others about areas where mine and UXO are present. They should have the skills to recognize official warning signs and to make and place warning signs themselves.

- **Feedback:** The public should understand the collective and individual benefits of informing CMAC awareness teams, other CMAC operations or local authorities about mines/UXO found or suspected.

- **Support:** People should understand the importance of supporting CMAC by actively providing mine/UXO information, maintaining mine warning signs, mine awareness materials, staying away from demining sites and, in general, supporting all CMAC operations in every possible way.

- **Motivation:** The mine awareness knowledge and skills must be regularly reinforced through both mass media and repeated MAT efforts, especially if statistics remain high in target areas. Since most people living in mine/UXO affected areas know something about the problem already, it is important to make them understand extensively. They are respon-

sible for taking the necessary precautions to avoid mine/UXO accidents until the area is cleared.

Effectiveness

Even the most effective awareness program could not stop all accidents from happening. In Cambodia, it is a sad fact that some people simply cannot survive without taking daily risks. They need to cross mine fields to get water, food and firewood. CMAC's awareness educators visit such areas daily. In addition to providing awareness education, it also helps communities to request mine action that can reduce their problems until clearance is achieved. Risk-assessments and mine/UXO reports provided by CMAC's awareness teachers have become a main source of tasks for Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Community Mine Marking Teams. So the Mine/UXO Awareness Program is actually contributing to accident reduction in two ways: it makes people more aware, able and intent to avoid accidents and it helps to facilitate clearance activities.

Mine/UXO Awareness is a demanding task because it aims at long-term behavior change, which is far more difficult than merely informing people about the dangers of mines and UXO. The direct outputs of Mine/UXO Awareness are not easily measured, because it is impossible to isolate the many, often fluctuating factors that contribute to behavior and change.

Cambodia has seen a steady decrease in civilian accident rates. Assessments clearly show that the populations at risk want mine/UXO awareness education, that they participate actively with CMAC to find ways to avoid being at risk and that they yield to CMAC's instructions. Awareness-educated villages are much more likely to make and maintain warning signs, to report mines/UXO to CMAC and to effectively instruct their children.

Through an integrated approach to mine awareness instruction actively involving both the community and humanitarian organizations, Cambodians can safely co-exist with the innumerable dangers mine threats pose daily. CMAC will achieve its objectives, educating the people of the preventive means to avoid landmines and UXO, which will continue the steady decline of civilian accident rates until Cambodia is officially declared a mine-free nation. ■

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A woman reports a directional mine discovered in her backyard.

Photo c/o CMAC



A father reads to his children a mine awareness poster that shows them what to do to avoid mine incidents.

Photo c/o CMAC