
CAMBODIA: REDUCING CASUALTIES, RETURNING LAND TO PRODUCTIVE USE

THE LANDMINE PROBLEM

Thirty years of conflict associated with political unrest, wars, and international border disputes have made Cambodia one of the countries most severely affected by landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). Some 60-to-70 mine-related accidents are reported each month — one of the highest rates anywhere in the world. Landmines and UXO have accounted for more than 30,000 injuries throughout the country, and in 2002 civilians represented 98 percent of reported mine casualties. The Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) estimates that up to one million landmines are contaminating 2,000 square kilometers of Cambodian soil, and it reports that mines and UXO have contaminated 45.5 percent of the 6,422 villages surveyed.

The northwest, the most heavily mined area, accounts for the largest number of casualties and is therefore the highest demining priority. In addition, two central and southern provinces contain large areas of suspected minefields. Landmines constitute a long-term threat to socio-economic development, limiting living opportunities for Cambodians in rural areas and making it difficult and hazardous to access essential resources and facilities such as water, roads, bridges, and cultivable land. Some of Cambodia's mined regions are still waiting for clearance activities to begin. The best estimate is that the program will need at least another five years of support from the United States and other donor nations before self-sustaining technical, operational, and financial capabilities are fully realized.

U.S. PARTNERSHIPS

Cambodia has received over \$31 million in U.S. humanitarian mine action assistance since fiscal year 1993. This funding has augmented financial assistance from the UN Development Program Trust Fund and other international donors, allowing

Cambodia to obtain necessary demining training and equipment. The bulk of funding for mine clearance has gone to CMAC, HALO Trust, and Mines Advisory Group (MAG). In fiscal year 2003 alone, the United States provided an estimated \$3.2 million in humanitarian demining grants to these organizations for operations in Cambodia.

PROGRAM CONCERNS

Although the humanitarian demining program in Cambodia is mature, the number of mine casualties remains unacceptably high. The rate of casualty decrease, which had been dramatic in the first few years of the program, has not dropped in the past three years. This can be explained by inadequate funding for mine risk education, by population growth, and by new settlements of internally displaced persons and returning refugees, among other factors. CMAC will try to reverse this trend by increasing the number of mine-risk education programs over the next several years.

Adequate funding has always been a problem. A financial crisis hit Cambodia about three years ago and the demining program had to lay off a large percentage of its staff. Although this problem has been largely remedied, continued funding over the long term is a major concern. The United States has played a strong leadership role in moving international donors toward direct funding of CMAC. The United States also insists that an independent on-site company to provide quality assurance monitoring to CMAC.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The U.S. government's mine action program in Cambodia seeks to reduce civilian casualties, create conditions for the return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes, reinforce stability, and encourage international cooperation and

participation. The program in Cambodia is accomplishing these goals by providing many mine action initiatives. In addition to training and equipping indigenous personnel, various demining organizations such as CMAC, HALO Trust, MAG (Mines Advisory Group), and RCAF (Royal Cambodian Armed Forces) deminers, in partnership with the United States, have cleared a total of 122 million meters of land in Cambodia.

According to the Landmine Monitor Report 2003, 25 percent of the 2002 landmine casualties required an amputation. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has invested more than \$7 million in Cambodia's prosthetics and rehabilitation programs for landmine-accident survivors. Since 1996, USAID funds have not only enabled Cambodia's prosthetics and rehabilitation programs to provide mobility assistance to nearly 10,000 landmine victims and other people with disabilities, they have also supported the Disability Action Council, a semi-autonomous body that has been delegated authority by the Royal Cambodian Government to oversee all programs related to people with disabilities.

From May 2001 to April 2003, U.S. government funds have facilitated the destruction of 2,500 landmines and the clearance of approximately 2.7 million square meters of land. In addition, U.S. assistance has funded the acquisition of demining equipment, personal protective gear, the training of manual demining teams, and landmine impact surveys. The U.S.-funded heavy equipment, including tractors, vegetation-cutters, and mini-flails, continues to assist deminers greatly, accelerating the pace of their activities by as much as 60 percent. A primary goal of the U.S. program in Cambodia continues to be building up an indigenous capacity to handle clearance requirements.

However, the true measure of mine clearance operations in Cambodia goes well beyond the total amount of land cleared. The real benefit must be measured in the numbers of Cambodians who have regained safe access to land for resettlement and production. Land once sown with persistent landmines can now be used for agriculture, roads, health centers, and schools that benefit the entire country. ●