

CAMBODIA: Landmine challenge to development

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PHNOM PENH, 11 September 2008 ([IRIN](#)) - Landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) casualties in Cambodia fell to an all-time low of 351 in 2007, further evidence of the downward trend since the 1990s.

The post-conflict peak was 1996, when Cambodia suffered 4,320 landmine or ERW-related deaths and injuries, according to a government report.

But challenges remain.

An unknown number of villages - perhaps more than 40 percent nationwide - are vulnerable to landmines, the government said. It tried to estimate the extent of contaminated land in 2002 but later judged its measurements poorly defined. These problems, coupled with scarce land resources - partly due to widespread evictions and spiralling property prices - place additional importance on developing the newly available land after clearance, according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

"Cambodia remains one of the most mine/ERW contaminated countries in the world and will require sustained external funding into the medium term to overcome it," Steve Munroe, UNDP mine action programme manager, told IRIN. "By strengthening the mine-clearance process and making productive land available to the rural poor, UNDP's mine-clearance activities directly contribute to poverty reduction in Cambodia," he said.

According to the Cambodia Millennium Development Goals, eliminating the negative development impact of landmines, including limited arable land, is just as important as cutting the numbers of victims. "In terms of the prioritisation of landmine clearance ... they [mine action groups] must integrate their development and mine action programmes to address poverty," Heng Ratana, deputy director-general of the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC)

Following up on mine-clearance projects with community-based education projects and checking on the efficient use of land after clearance remain priorities for mine-action NGOs.

Farming risks

Villagers often take extreme risks farming but have no choice given their impoverished circumstances, says UNDP. However, Leang Sopheap, a farmer in the heavily mined northwest Battambang Province, is willing to take the risk. "I have to feed my family, and that's the most important thing," he told IRIN. "We can guess about landmines when we build farms, but we won't always be certain."

Despite a significant drop in casualties over the past six years, landmines and ERW continue to affect countless communities by limiting access to land that could be put to productive use, according to UNDP. Focusing solely on the number of mines unearthed loses sight of the bigger development picture, says Herbert Feddon, senior project manager at BACTEC, in Cambodia, a commercial de-mining company.

"Problem is, the donors want to see more and more landmines cleared per hectare, but that's quite difficult with the fatigue the de-miners experience in Cambodia," he said.

Most objects found are random bits of metal debris, which, coupled with scorching heat, makes clearance particularly onerous, he explained. About 16 landmines were discovered per hectare of land in 2007, the government estimates.

"There's also the difficulty in measuring the number of landmines in Cambodia," he added. Estimates range from two to 10 million but he says around five million could be in the ballpark.

Bloody history

Bombings against Cambodia during the second world war and the subsequent French-Indochina war in the 1950s scattered the countryside - particularly at the Vietnam border - with ERWs.

From 1969 to 1973, the US dropped more than 500,000 MT of explosives during its carpet-bombing campaigns against the communists. The unexploded remnants of these bombs kill or injure more Cambodians annually than landmines, at 198 victims in 2007.

In 1967, the North Vietnamese army began laying landmines in Cambodia to protect its supply routes; mining intensified in 1970, when General Lon Nol mined the countryside against the Khmer Rouge communists.

Throughout the 1980s, the Thai military mined its border to defend against a possible spillover from the retreating Khmer Rouge, who had lost their hold on the capital. The Cambodian government and rebel forces also mined the country against each other throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

The arrival of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992, a peacekeeping mission, signalled the beginning of mine-action initiatives. Since then, Cambodia has signed the 1997 Ottawa Treaty to ban landmines and has destroyed its stockpiles of ordnance.

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