

Humanitarian De-mining

Focus on Malai



CWS-CAMBODIA



Residents of some villages in Malai District, Banteay Meanchey province, still rely on hand-made signs and marked stones to identify areas contaminated with landmines and/or unexploded ordnance (UXO). The signs show skulls and crossbones or words of warning. Residents also use sticks and knotted grass to identify contaminated areas, which sometimes shift during the monsoon season.

This district, along the Thai border, is 1 of the most impoverished in Cambodia and 1 of the final conflict areas between the remnants of the Khmer Rouge and Cambodian government

forces. CWS works in 9 villages there with the Cambodia Family Economic Development Association (CFEDA) and has provided funding for one de-mining team from the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) to work there.

The team conducted de-mining in and around 3 villages from July 2006 to October 2008. (Funding for de-mining ran out in June 2008, but MAG continued its work for an additional 3 months.)

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Less than 4 percent of the land in and around the 9 villages in this district had been de-mined as of 2006, according

to a baseline survey conducted that year by CWS-Cambodia.

Residents of Malai said that about 66 percent of their land was contaminated by mines and UXO and that another 30 percent was possibly contaminated. Still, sometimes they had to enter these areas to farm or to search for forest products, such as bamboo and firewood, or water. About 25 percent of all households have at least 1 member who is either a landmine/UXO victim or had sustained an injury during Cambodia's civil conflict, which continued in this district until the late 90s.

More than 40 percent of households in these villages have no land for housing and/or farming because of landmines and UXO contamination, the survey found. Poverty is extreme and food shortages are so severe, especially between July and October, that families are driven into debt or across the border in search of work that is usually exploitive and often dangerous.

The survey was conducted in 2006 and published in January 2007. It stressed the urgent need for de-mining in Malai. Since 2006, there have been 31 more casualties from landmines and UXO in these 9 villages, according to data collected by MAG. Twenty-eight were caused by landmines and 3 by UXO. Four people were killed, 10 people had limbs amputated and 17 suffered other injuries.

Humanitarian de-mining of Malai should be continued.

The de-mining done by MAG has freed land for farming, community ponds, and schools. It has allowed CFEDA to introduce CWS-Cambodia's village-based development in these villages, but landmines and UXO constrain it.

Due to funding constraints, MAG could only engage one de-mining team, rather than 2 as originally proposed. Moreover, the number of targeted villages was reduced from 9 to 3. Consequently, the number of vulnerable families who directly benefited from de-mining was fewer than anticipated. Besides funding constraints, clearance was also impacted by a number of factors, including adverse weather conditions and a greater than expected amount of metal fragmentation (each fragment must be treated as a landmine).

In total, 219 anti-personnel mines, 15 UXO, 2 anti-tank mines and tens of thousands of metal fragments were removed.

Still, thousands of people benefited from the de-mining, as it cleared land for farming and decreased landmine-related anxiety. Previously, untrained residents had tried de-mining on their own. In the 9 villages where the survey was conducted, researchers counted 15 men who had been injured while trying to remove landmines or UXO, 6 of whom had sustained permanent disabilities.

Without further de-mining in Malai it is feared that untrained residents will try to do it themselves.

About Malai

- Malai is one of 8 district in Banteay Meanchey province. It has 6 communes and 38 villages with a total population of about 37,000 people.
- It is one of the poorest and most isolated districts in Cambodia and is located at the western edge of the province, along the Thai border.
- Most of its residents are farmers: about 50 percent grow rice; others grow a variety of crops, including corn, cassava and soybeans.
- Most households have at least 1 member working as a day laborer within Cambodia or in Thailand. (In some villages they simply walk across the border.)
- Livestock raising (cows, oxen, swine and poultry) is common but production is limited due to lack of training in animal husbandry and veterinarian services. (Only about 30 percent of livestock has been vaccinated.)
- Residents are heavily indebted to moneylenders, micro credit institutions, relatives and banks. Typically, they borrow to buy food, healthcare,

medicine and fertilizer, then repay after they harvest their crops or with money earned by day labor.

- Access to safe water is minimal. During the rainy season residents rely on household water storage containers. During the dry season they rely on ponds, hand-dug wells and streams. Water from the ponds and wells contains high levels of bacteria. About half of the residents do not boil drinking water. Water filters are rare.
- Residents have received very little health education and when sick often rely on untrained pharmacists for diagnosis and medicine, or traditional remedies and offerings to spirits.
- The average level of education is Grade 2. About 30 percent of adults cannot read or write. More than 20 percent of school-age children do not attend school.



Source: CWS baseline survey

The Lethal Legacy of Landmines

An interview with MAG Cambodia Country Programme Manager Mr. Rupert Leighton

➔ Many people have the impression that landmines and UXO are no longer a grave threat in Cambodia because large areas have been cleared and the number of casualties has declined. How critical is de-mining in Cambodia?

Let's be clear. The legacy of landmines is more than just the threat of maiming and killing people. Contaminated land is a physical obstacle to rural development. It traps families in poverty. Landmines block access to land for resettlement, for agriculture, and for the development of essential services, such as schools clinics and water points.

Although the mine action sector has had impressive progress in reducing the number of new casualties in Cambodia since 1992 (from nearly 6,000 per year in the 1990s to less than 300 in 2008), communities have learnt to live alongside landmines and UXOs and have learnt how to minimize their exposure to them.

There are still significant amounts of kilometers that are contaminated with landmines and Malai is one of the worst affected, with a large population struggling to live in the limited areas where there are no mines. MAG and CWS are working hard to liberate land to allocate it to the poorest families to alleviate crushing poverty and allow them to build better futures.

➔ Causality statistics are often cited as the measure of success of de-mining efforts, but is the decline in casualties a result of people avoiding large tracts of land as a result of the educational component of de-mining?

This is exactly right. Casualty statistics give us an indication of a communities vulnerability, but it is by no means the defining criteria. For example, in Malai there

are both new villages (villages settled by newcomers to the region over the last 8 years or so) and established villages. Despite similar levels of contamination across all of the villages, newer communities are much more at risk to the physical threat of landmines as they do not have the knowledge built up of where these suspect areas are.

However, both new and old communities are equally restricted by the presence of landmines to expand their villages, their agricultural land, to develop infrastructure, to build houses for the homeless.

➔ Why is it critical to increase resources for de-mining in Malai District?

Malai is the 3rd most contaminated district in Cambodia (according to casualty indicators) with only Sala Krau in Pailin and Ratanak Mondol in Battambang having

Malai is one of the most highly landmine contaminated areas in one of the most landmine-affected countries in the world.

Below: Mr. Rupert Leighton

Right: Residents of Chheu Teal village, Malai District, prepare recently de-mined land for cultivation. (Photo from MAG)





higher casualty rates. The district has a long history of warfare and the infamous K5 mine belt (see Developing in Sight, page 14) runs across the top of the whole district. Malai is of the highest priority, not only to MAG, but for the Royal Government of Cambodia.

➔ **Even though they are aware of the location of mine contaminated areas, some residents still enter them in search of forest products due to the extreme poverty. Is this more prevalent in Malai District than other districts?**

Where there is extreme poverty (and increasingly where families do not have sufficient land to cultivate), people will take calculated risks in order to make ends meet, through breaching into known contaminated areas in order to forage for items of value (principally bamboo, which grows abundantly in areas with high contamination as these are areas that people have not entered due to the presence of landmines).

Malai is a good example of an area with high landmine density and high population characterized by a high degree of rural poverty. In addition, Malai's proximity to the Thai border means that there is a significant movement of population across the border for seasonal daily labor.

This has an impact of increasing the number of landless families in the area, and makes these families more dependent on the seasonal labour market for income. When there is a dip in the labour market in Thailand; families are forced to seek alternative sources of income to cover any hunger gaps, which often involve breaching into known densely landmine-contaminated areas.

➔ **CWS and MAG have been long-term partners but a Cambodian NGO has become a partner for the first time. Why is this so important?**

Both MAG and CWS strive to build the capacity of local people to ensure full cooperation of the local population in development activities. MAG is very happy to work with CFEDA as they work on a house-to-house basis with communities in Malai, ensuring that local needs are met, that programmes are appropriate, that local people are involved in all aspects of the development process.

➔ **How close is the correlation between extreme poverty in Malai District and the prevalence of landmines and UXO?**

The blocking of access to agricultural land by the presence of landmines is an important factor when considering solutions to alleviating poverty. In order to assist these most vulnerable families out of poverty, they need land. Landless families are consistently those who are at highest risk, as they are the ones forced into a situation where economic choices have diminished



to an extent that they feel their only option is to cut bamboo in mined areas.

By allocating land and working with development partners in developing alternative income streams (such as market gardening, pig raising and fruit tree growing) we are not only clearing the immediate threat, but working with families to identify clear routes out of extreme poverty.

➔ Why hasn't this district been cleared yet? Why is taking so long?

The clearance of landmines is a slow and laborious process. Despite significant clearance by MAG and other clearance operators in the district, there still remains a great amount of work to do.

As a guide, an individual de-miner might clear about 60 square meters per day (remembering that a metal detector, the tool of the trade, detects metal, not

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landmines, meaning that every single piece of scrap, every rusty nail, every ring pull, has to be excavated as though it were lethal ordnance). This obviously is slow work.

The Royal Government of Cambodia is in the process of applying for a 10 year extension to the Ottawa Treaty, which stipulates that signatory countries must clear all of the landmines in their territory. The Cambodian Government estimates that we will still not have finished in 10 years, despite significant progress.

Cambodia remains one of the most highly landmine contaminated countries in the world and MAG remains committed to assisting the Royal Government of Cambodia protect the safety of Cambodians, as well as providing support to the development process.

Malai is one of the most highly landmine contaminated areas in one of the most landmine-affected countries in the world.

CWS-Cambodia and MAG staff join a graduation ceremony for local de-miners in Kompong Thom province.



Remnants of War: a former soldier's story

"I became a soldier in the Khmer Rouge in 1975, stationed in Pailin," recalls Malai resident Mrs. Meak Choeun. "From 1979 we fought there against the soldiers of the government and the Vietnamese troops, but they won and took control of Pailin in 1988, so I escaped to Samlout district in Battambang.

In 1989 we fought back to regain control of Pailin again – everyday I had to evade the danger from countless bombs."

Following that terrible accident we also lost our cow, which was killed in a mine explosion in the same area. My family and others were terrified to go near that land, so we had to leave it unused

Like many other former Khmer Rouge, she and her family settled in Malai in 1991, moving to Tumnob village in 1992, an area that had been a war zone. When the conflict ceased land was given to the families of former soldiers, she and her husband received 2 hectares.

"In 1992 my husband tried to clear our land so we could cultivate it. He found so many mines and UXO that he filled 2 or 3 sacks with them. He dug a hole and put them in it, placed firewood over it, then lit it and ran clear. Sometimes, he used the explosives for fishing, but he does not do that anymore," she said.

In 1997, her husband hired a company to de-mine their land. "They charged 3,200 Thai baht for 1 hectare. After they cleared it, we

rented part of our land to a newly-married couple from Kompong Thom who had recently settled here," Mrs. Meak recalled.

"We thought the land was safe, but when they started to clear vegetation away so they could cultivate the woman stepped on a landmine and her leg was blown off. Following that terrible accident we also lost our cow, which was killed in a mine explosion in the same area. My family and others were terrified to go near that land, so we had to leave it unused," she said.

The family had to seek other ways to survive. "Two of my 6 children are now working in Thailand as laborers. My husband also does odd jobs like picking beans or corn. He gets about 70 Baht (about \$1.75) a day for that, but the work is not regular," she said.

Her husband still suffers from war injuries. "He was injured many times during the conflict." she said.

"In 1985, he crossed a tripwire and set off a booby trap. He was seriously injured by mine shrapnel. Even now, more than 20 years later, he suffers.

Things are getting better. In 2007, MAG started to clear my land and that of the other villagers. I am very happy because I know that after MAG's clearance, I will have absolutely safe land for farming.

"There were hundreds of tiny pieces, like needles, which stayed in his body and developed into tetanus. We removed the large pieces, but he still gets convulsions and sometimes lumps appear, which seep pus and pieces of the shrapnel come out of them.

"We have to pay for medicine for him, so I also have to work when he is ill. It is not easy dealing with this."

Mrs. Meak is more optimistic since MAG de-mined her land. "Things are getting better. In 2007, MAG started to clear my land and that of the other villagers. I am very happy because I know that after MAG's clearance, I will have absolutely safe land for farming.

"I plan to use half a hectare to produce rice and on the rest I will grow other crops like beans and corn," she said.



Photo courtesy of MAG.