



WORLD WITHOUT MINES

PROJECT: SRI LANKA



Photos: DASH

37-year-old deminer Kosaladevi Premaratnam survived thanks to good-quality protective equipment.

KOSALADEVI'S ACCIDENT

In spite of all precautions, demining remains dangerous work – especially when the mines are made largely of plastic and do not get picked up by metal detectors. So it was in the case of Kosaladevi Premaratnam, a deminer at World Without Mines in Sri Lanka.

The „Elephant Pass” is the name given to the man-made causeway that connects mainland Sri Lanka with the Jaffna peninsula to its north. The nickname originates from the fact that, before the causeway was built, the main island and the peninsula were separated by shallows which could only be crossed by elephant. The causeway connects the homeland of the Tamil minority, who have been oppressed for decades, with that of the largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese. During the 1983-2009 war between Sinhalese troops and the Tamil liberation army, large parts of the

bitterly contested Elephant Pass became strewn with mines.

On 3 March 2014, five years after the end of the civil war, a team from our partner organisation Delvon Assistance of Social Harmony (DASH) set about clearing one of the many minefields on the Elephant Pass. Kosaladevi Premaratnam, a 37-year-old mother of four, was among them.

Normally the pressure plate faces upwards

Kosaladevi woke up at four in the morning as usual and prepared breakfast and



Large amounts of vegetation and hard soil make the demining work in Sri Lanka especially laborious.

Since then, Kosaladevi has been promoted to Section Leader – a position of great responsibility.



Photos: DASH

lunch for her children. After putting on her protective equipment and completing the standard security check, she starts work at 8.30. At only 32 degrees, it's a pleasant temperature.

The day begins the same as always. The many mines are not all that's left behind in the former war zone: there are also many metal splinters from exploded munitions, which makes working with the metal detectors harder. In the late morning, the team breaks off their work to practise the drill for a potential mine detonation accident. Kosaladevi has no idea that, just an hour or so later, she herself will need to be rescued.

It is 12.38. Kosaladevi loosens the soil with a rake designed especially for this purpose. She knows that the mines are only buried a few centimetres deep. She also knows the way they are usually positioned: with the trigger mechanism – a pressure-sensitive plate – facing upwards. When she pushes the rake into the soil and drags the prongs towards her, she thinks she's safe.

The ambulance is always at the ready

But then something goes «pop». Dirt and stones fly through the air, and a cloud of smoke and dust rises up. The other mem-

bers of the team hear Kosaladevi scream and see her fall to the ground. They hurry over to her straight away and see blood on her hands, her left knee and the left side of her waist.

A mere four minutes later, the ambulance is already there; positioned at the entrance to the minefield, it's constantly at the ready. Two paramedics inspect Kosaladevi. They notice that, luckily, her visor and clothing have absorbed most of the shock of the explosion. Her injuries are not serious. The paramedics lay Kosaladevi on a stretcher, stem her bleeding, bandage her wounds and hook her up to a drip, before driving away.

Only 22 minutes after the explosion, Kosaladevi is in hospital receiving further medical attention. Six days later, she is discharged and can go home to her children. But due to ongoing shock and trauma, she will still be signed off sick from work for some time.

Kosaladevi gets promoted

Meanwhile, her employer DASH conducts a thorough investigation into how the accident happened, concluding that Kosaladevi neither behaved negligently nor flouted the security standards. It seems much more likely that the Type 72 mine – manufactured in China and made largely of plastic so that it is virtually impossible for metal detectors to pick up – had become dislodged from its original position over the years so that its trigger mechanism now faced to the side rather than upwards. When Kosaladevi touched the mine with her heavy rake, the mine went off. DASH immediately introduces training for all deminers that is designed specifically for this scenario so as to rule out similar accidents.

Seven years have passed since then. Kosaladevi has fully recovered, both physically and mentally, and still works as a mine clearer. In 2018, DASH promoted her to Section Leader on account of her excellent performance and knowledge. „I hope to see my country mine-free as soon as possible,” says Kosaladevi, „and that my hard work contributes to this.”

Please support female deminers in countries like Sri Lanka with a donation.

Thank you!



Kosaladevi is the mother of four daughters and hopes to become a grandmother soon.



Photos: World Without Mines/Linda Pollari

Rolf Stocker, President of the Foundation Board of World Without Mines since April 2021

„I ENJOY WORKING FOR AND WITH PEOPLE”

Rolf Stocker is taking on his new role as President of World Without Mines with both expertise and passion. He intends to preserve the foundation’s strong spirit.

The dice had been cast. During the 1990s, Rolf Stocker visited the International Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC) museum in Geneva, where anyone interested was asked to pick up two dice. Each dice roll corresponded to a country. Those who so wished could keep on rolling – until, for example, they made „Switzerland”.

„That was a real eye-opener for me,” says the sixty-year-old, looking back. It had just become unambiguously clear to him how privileged people are to be born in Switzerland. He felt inspired „to give something back to society”.

The varied career of the qualified mechanic and social education worker bears witness to his interest in people who have not had it easy in life. Stocker has been an ICRC delegate in Tanzania, Rwanda and Angola, head of an ICRC office in Iraq and Colombia, departmental head at Swiss Labour Assistance and head of humanitarian

assistance at Swiss Church Aid (HEKS) as well as holding a leading role at Solidar Suisse and heading up the social education organisation LebensLernOrt Rosenberg. He now works as a professional deputy. „I enjoy working for and with people.”

Stocker encountered the topic of mines again and again, for example in Iraq, or in 1996 in Angola, where he was involved in preparing for Princess Diana’s visit to mine victims. When he was asked by World Without Mines founder Claudine Bolay to succeed her after her 24 years as president of the foundation, Rolf Stocker did not have to think twice: „World Without Mines is a small but extremely valuable organisation.” His goal is to continue to lead World Without Mines in the spirit espoused by its founder and to strike a balance between the hands-on demining work performed by human beings and the new possibilities afforded by technology.



Claudine Bolay Zraggen led World Without Mines since it was founded in 1997. She is happy to see the foundation delivered into good hands, saying: „I have every confidence in Rolf Stocker and firmly believe that he will achieve a great deal at World Without Mines.”

More information on World Without Mines projects can be found on our website: www.wom.ch/en

The women who clear landmines for World Without Mines have to take regular breaks as nothing is more dangerous than a lapse in concentration.



Photos: HALO Trust

SUCCESS IN ANGOLA

After 27 years of civil war, Angola is now littered with mines. Our team – exclusively made up of women – is working for a better future for the country.



A mine clearer starts preparing an area to be swept for landmines.

Since the war ended in 2002, streets, railway lines and infrastructure in Angola have been gradually cleared of mines. Yet especially in rural regions, which are among the world's poorest, the contamination by landmines is often still serious. For this reason, farmers frequently attempt to remove mines themselves. Accidents that injure both people and cattle are thus a regular occurrence. Losing cattle is a big problem for farmers as their animals are often all the assets they own.

To provide relief in this emergency, the NGO Halo Trust set up the project „100 Women in Demining in Angola” in Benguela Province in 2017, and World Without Mines is one of the first organisations to get on board. We are proud to say that, thanks not least to our involvement, 41 more women have recently been recruited and there are now as many as 128 female deminers

at work. In other words, the original target has been exceeded.

The deminers' achievements are impressive. For example, they successfully cleared mines from the village of Kanenguere and its surroundings so that it was possible to build a new school. For years, the 30 children living in and near the village had not received any form of education whatsoever, and now they can go to school again every day.

Our project is also helping previously unemployed women earn their own income. One female deminer says: „Now I can always buy fresh vegetables for my children.” In addition, the deminers see themselves as role models for the next generation and are proud to be doing such important work for their country – work which used to be a male preserve in Angola.

IMPRESSUM

Circulation 20,000, published twice a year
Text Ursula Eichenberger, Gabriela Fuchs, Christian Schmidt
Concept Oliver Gemperle GmbH, Zurich
Printer: Druckerei Albsrieden, Zurich
Paper Claro Silk, FSC

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