

# WORLD WITHOUT MINES

# NEWSLETTER

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PROJECT: CAMBODIA



Photo: CSHD

Cambodia's eastern provinces in particular contain a lot of mines and there are around 2,400 mines per kilometre on the Thai border.

## Aki Ra – a former child soldier who removes mines

Explosive remnants of war in Cambodia have killed or maimed 65,000 people in the last forty years – more than in almost any other country. World Without Mines is committed to accelerating the clearance of mines in Cambodia.

„I was showing a group of tourists around our mine museum recently when a man suddenly came running in,” Aki Ra tells us. „He had just seen children playing with an artillery shell only a hundred metres away.” Aki Ra left the visitors where they were and ran to find the children. They were actually standing there with the shell in their hands. He called to them telling them not to move, took the shell and removed the detonator. It was still live even more than twenty years after the end of the war. Aki Ra then returned to his visitors and

put the shell in his museum straightaway.

Siem Reap, the second largest city in Cambodia, is where Aki Ra founded his mine museum, which he uses to educate visitors about the risks of unexploded ordnance with a view to avoiding further accidents. He also established and leads Cambodian Self Help Demining (CSHD), a small, highly professional mine clearance organisation. If that is not enough, he and his wife also founded an orphanage together, which around thirty children now call home, some of whom have been injured by mines themselves.

There is a reason why mines and other weaponry are such an important topic in Aki Ra's life.



Photo: CSHD

Located and dug up – these anti-personnel mines will be disarmed in the near future.

### „I did bad things“

Aki Ra does not know exactly how old he is. He was born at the beginning of the 1970s, when the Khmer Rouge took control of his country and went on to kill 1.7 million people, including Aki's parents. He grew up an orphan in a military camp and was trained as a child soldier. He had to lay mines, several thousand a month, at just ten years of age. He realises today that he „did bad things“. But war was normal for him; he did not know that such a thing as life in peacetime existed.

When the UN answered the urgent cry for mine clearance in Cambodia after the war had come to an end, Aki Ra signed up to lend his support because he wanted to undo what he had helped to bring about. Originally christened Eoun Yeak, he was now given the nickname „Aki Ra“ after a Japanese brand of sewing machines in recognition of the speed and precision with which he disarmed mines. Over the years, he estimates that he has defused around 50,000 mines, shells and unexploded bombs.

### Only half of minefields have been cleared

In 2007, Aki Ra founded the Cambodian Self Help Demining organisation because he knew that more people had to get involved for his country to ever stand a chance of being free of mines. This is because only half of all minefields have been cleared in Cambodia, leaving over 1,600 square kilometres of land littered with the fatal devices. Since then, he has no longer been working alone, as he now has a team of around twenty minesweepers. His organisation is mainly focused on the rural areas of Cambodia. The population there is poor and since they



Lots of women are also getting involved in the Cambodian Self Help Demining organisation to help secure a better future for their country.

### OUR PARTNER IN CAMBODIA

So far Cambodian Self Help Demining organisation has:

- cleared 124 minefields
- made 4,400,000 square metres of land safe
- returned land to 4,802 families
- given 33,614 people their livelihoods back.

By supporting Aki Ra's Cambodian Self Help Demining (CSHD) organisation, World Without Mines is making a direct contribution to the efforts to rid Cambodia of the remnants of a brutal war.

The weapons removal team responds to requests from authorities in remote villages to remove unexploded ordnance there. These are often areas which would not have been otherwise demined. The team also educates the villagers about the dangers and correct way to act in these kinds of situations.

Since 2003, American Bill Morse and his Landmine Relief Fund have been supporting Cambodian Self Help Demining, for example by responsibly allocating funds and making sure results are achieved on site.



As well as different types of landmines, there are also lots of other unexploded remnants of war in Cambodia.

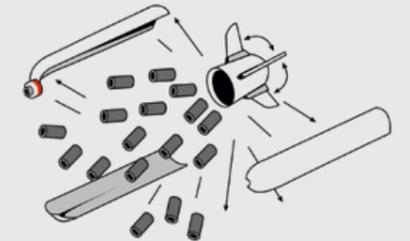
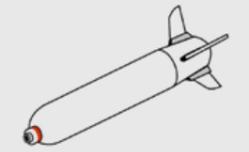
are scarcely in a position to raise awareness of their plight, they are overlooked by the major international demining organisations. Aki Ra grew up in the countryside himself and knows that the people there are especially in need of help because, being unable to farm their land, they will only get poorer.

World Without Mines has now decided to support Aki Ra's crucial work. From spring 2017, we will be funding a weapons removal team for him, provisionally for one year. The team will mainly take on targeted emergency assignments in remote regions where mines have been reported. At the same time, the team will inform the people in these areas about the danger posed by mines and cluster munition.

Our aim is to finally speed up the process of freeing Cambodia of explosive ordnance twenty years after the war ended. „Working at the rate we are today, demining would take another 50 to 100 years,“ Aki Ra believes. That is too long a time and too dangerous for him as well as for us. Although the number of incidents involving mines and unexploded ordnance is declining in Cambodia, 83 people were still injured or killed in 2016 and there have already been three accidents this year. The latest was the death of a farmer as he was digging up a tree stump. His son and two helpers were also injured.

Aki Ra says, „I won't stop until my country is safe“.

### What is cluster munition?



Cambodia and Laos, two of the countries on which our projects focus, are heavily contaminated with cluster munition. The US dropped around 300 million so-called „bomblets“ here during the Vietnam War.

Bomblet is another word for cluster munition, which are fired with rockets or shells or dropped as bombs. The munition's outer housing then opens up, spreading hundreds of small explosive devices – bomblets – over a large area.

A considerable proportion of the bomblets do not explode on impact and so become unexploded ordnance. As is the case with landmines, civilians in particular fall victim to cluster munition. A total of 119 states have now signed the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which bans the use of this weapon.

Every mine removed means a life saved.

Please support our mission against mines and cluster munitions by making a donation.

Thank you!



Photo: UXO Lao

Mrs Phanh in her paddy field. Rice is the staple food for the 6.5 million people living in Laos.

## Danger in the paddy field

Mrs Phanh has been cultivating her paddy field for 16 years in the knowledge that the risk of unexploded ordnance lies in wait everywhere.

Mrs Phanh lives in the village of Thapha in Southeast Laos. After the untimely death of her husband, she had to raise her now grown-up son alone as her small family's only breadwinner. She makes her living breeding cattle and growing rice.

Mrs Phanh works in her paddy field every day, where she regularly comes across war remnants. Laos was bombarded with over two million tons of cluster munition during the Vietnam War, and has since become the most contaminated country in the world. When Mrs Phanh finds unexploded ordnance, she puts it at the edge of her field and carries on with her work.

### The importance of explaining the risks

In October 2015, our partner organisation UXO Lao held a meeting in Mrs Phanh's village to educate the villagers about unexploded ordnance. Even though Mrs Phanh knew there were unexploded pieces of ordnance in her field, she carried on regardless because she is dependent on the rice harvest

and did not have time to stop working. However, during the meeting, she suddenly became aware of how dangerous these devices are and reported her findings. Shortly afterwards, a team from UXO Lao inspected her field to isolate the danger zone.

### Demining

A team demined the paddy field in March 2016. They found and removed 113 unexploded devices, a task which took them eight days. Mrs Phanh was shocked, but relieved. „My son and I no longer have to be afraid of walking on the land. We're very grateful!"

#### OUR WORK IN LAOS

World Without Mines has been working in the Khammouane Province since 2008. This year we are supporting two demining teams and an educational team. 92 percent of the cleared area is agricultural land belonging to small farmers. Mine clearing in Laos is an important step in the fight against poverty.



Photo: World Without Mines

A BLU-26 bomblet is the size of a tennis ball. Cluster munition can be found everywhere in Laos: in paddy fields, schoolyards and on the street.

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