

WORLD WITHOUT MINES

INTERVIEW: AKI RA



Photo: World Without Mines

Aki Ra, a former child soldier, now Director of the organisation Cambodian Self Help Demining

„I WANT TO BE A ROLE MODEL FOR THE NEXT GENERATION”

Cambodia is still suffering from the consequences of the Khmer Rouge’s reign of terror. As a child, Aki Ra was forced to become a soldier and lay mines. These days, he is committed to a mine-free Cambodia. Our Managing Director, Gabriela Fuchs, visited the country and spoke with him.

Aki Ra, what memories do you have of your time as a child soldier?

When I was around five years old, the Khmer Rouge attacked my village and abducted everyone who was big enough to carry a Kalashnikov. We learned to kill with it. If we had disobeyed the orders, we

would have been killed ourselves. I did a lot of bad things during that period. But I had no choice.

When was the first time you saw a mine?

It was when I was about ten years old. The Khmer Rouge did not explain to us



Photo: World Without Mines

The Khmer Rouge killed his parents and forcibly turned him into a child soldier – a trauma which Aki Ra overcomes with his tireless commitment to doing good.

Photo: World Without Mines



Aki Ra is the father of three children and lives in Siem Reap. This is also home to the landmines museum built by Aki Ra.

how they work. We had to watch what the adults did and copy it. Many of my friends who didn't get it right lost their lives.

How did you end up becoming a deminer?

In the 1990s, the UN peacekeeping mission arrived in Siem Reap looking for deminers. Because I was very familiar with the various types of mines, I was hired. I then spent three years working for the UN, learning how to use metal detectors and to defuse mines safely.

You have since founded your own demining organisation.

Yes. I spent many years defusing mines on my own first, at a guess roughly 50,000 mines, then I attended international courses to obtain a licence and be able to found my own organisation. For the last ten years or so we have been working in remote regions, making it possible for people to use their land again. There are no big factories in Cambodia; the people rely on their land.

You have also opened a landmines museum.

Through my work as a deminer I had collected tons of – defused – hand grenades, mines and other weapons. So, an idea came to me of showing people how dangerous these weapons are and how they work. I also homed orphaned and injured children at the museum, so that they were safe.

Where do you get your motivation from?

I know many people who have been

killed or mutilated by mines. So I want to make my country safer. Cambodia is still very heavily contaminated. I want my compatriots to stop having to be afraid of mines. Nobody should see their friends or children die due to these terrible weapons. But because there is still plenty to do to rid my homeland of mines, I want to be a role model for the next generation.

You have already achieved a lot – do you have other plans?

I have been looking after children with mine-related disabilities for the last 20 years and have created a home for them. But they are not the only ones who need help. There are many people who are still traumatised and also mentally impaired because of the war. They are older now. But there is nobody looking after these people – neither the state nor anyone else. My next project will be to help out here.

Would you like to deliver a message to people in Switzerland?

I'd love to! The support we receive from your country really means a lot to us. You are helping us to fulfil our dream of a mine-free Cambodia. Thank you for not forgetting us!

Photo: World Without Mines



„Every mine that we defuse means one less child losing a leg or even dying,” says Aki Ra. „Thank you, Switzerland, for the support!”

Our commitment in Cambodia

The Khmer Rouge regime as well as the other warring parties left behind an enormous mine problem in Cambodia. World Without Mines is therefore supporting Aki Ra's organisation, Cambodian Self Help Demining (CSHD). This year we are funding two explosive ordnance disposal teams. This is our way of helping to expand the capacities of a highly professional local organisation. CSHD also carries out rapid clearance missions in remote villages and has close ties to the population because it employs local people.



Reak Sa points in the textbook at the mine he found: a Chinese-made type 69 bounding mine.



Bounding mine, type 69: When detonated, a propelling charge launches the body of the mine about a metre into the air, where the main charge then explodes, spraying shrapnel all around.

„I FOUND A MINE LIKE THIS ONE TWO WEEKS AGO.”

When fourteen-year-old Reak Sa discovers a mine, he has no idea what to do. It is the same for many other children in Cambodia. Our team shows them how to behave and how to eliminate the danger.

The sixth-grade students sit expectantly on the benches at the school in Sen Techas. When the employees of Cambodian Self Help Demining (CSHD) and the visitors from Switzerland enter the room, they stand up and greet them.

There is a special subject on the timetable today: Risk Awareness. The CSHD team boss, Sen Kosal, begins by explaining various types of mines and other dangerous war materials. Then he introduces Sara San, who lost an arm as a child and later became a deminer. Together the two men perform a role play to help explain how the children should behave if they find a suspicious object in a field: „First, mark the spot with clumps of grass and branches, then carefully retrace your steps and get help.”

Reak Sa is not the only one to have found a mine

The children play an active part in the unusual lesson. Finally, Sen Kosal asks

which of the children has already found one of these objects.

In this class of 55 students, there are nine, including Reak Sa. He points to a photo and says: „I found a mine like this one two weeks ago in a rice field near my village.” „And what did you do?” asks Sen Kosal. „Nothing,” answers Reak Sa. He didn't know what to do, so he didn't mark the location or show anyone.

After this lesson, the children now know that in future they should immediately tell their parents or the teacher, who will then take further action.

Almost half of the victims are children

Children make up 47 percent of all the civilian victims of mines in the world. They often mistake these dangerous weapons for toys and, because of their stature, they are injured more severely and killed more frequently than adults.



Sok Pa Vy (12) found a Russian stake mine, which is called a „pine-apple mine” because of its appearance.

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Thank you!

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www.wom.ch

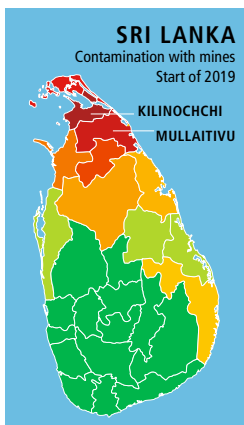


Photo: The HALO Trust

In Sri Lanka, there are a lot of mines buried approximately 15 cm deep in the ground. So, the soil has to be removed carefully before the mines can be disposed.

SRI LANKA – VISION UNDER THREAT

Sri Lanka's goal is to soon be mine-free. But the reduction in international donations, such as from the USA, is threatening that vision. World Without Mines is taking action, providing new support for local organisation DASH to help with demining in the Kilinochchi District.



The largest concentration of mines is in the districts of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu in northern Sri Lanka.

A civil war raged in Sri Lanka for 26 years. From 1983 until 2009, government troops and the insurgent Tamil militant organisation (LTTE) fought fierce battles. As a consequence, the north-eastern part of the country remains littered with mines.

In recent years, Sri Lanka has worked very hard to solve the mine problem. Thanks to a joint commitment between the government and demining organisations, the country has made huge progress. In the last two years, the area where mines remain has been halved to just under 26 square kilometres.

Unfortunately, major donors, like the USA, have now changed their priorities in terms of funding for demining projects, massively reducing the level of support. The goal of freedom from mines, which was

already tangibly close, is becoming a distant one again.

World Without Mines has responded to this situation, and since January 2019 has been supporting the local organisation Delvon Assistance for Social Harmony (DASH) with funding for a 29-strong demining team, which operates in one of the districts most densely contaminated by mines.

By taking this step, World Without Mines is helping to ensure that Sri Lanka does not have to abandon its vision after all. But not only that, we are also contributing to reconciliation and lasting peace: The demining organisation DASH hires not just single mothers or widows, but also and deliberately different ethnic and marginalised groups and brings them together on the job.

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