

Cambodian troops clear land mines as UN peacekeepers

Cambodia's troubled history is not a new theme for us. We covered it extensively after our visits there last year, particularly in relation to the still horrendous landmine legacy. Two reports out of Phnom Penh this week indicate the true bookends of this nation as it deals with its history and tries to turn it into a brighter future. Recently, the "Day of Anger" commemoration took place where thousands of Cambodians descend on the infamous Choeng Ek killing fields to reenact and grieve over the Khmer Rouge atrocities that took place there.

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Participants dramatised the bludgeoning, strangling and evisceration of bound victims during the ceremony, which also included offerings to monks. Meav Kong, 81, said he attends the ceremony every year to pray for the souls of relatives who died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, and that he believes all of them were killed at Choeng Ek.

"I was the only one who survived the killing fields. All of my relatives are gone," he said. "I will never forget the Pol Pot regime until I die."

Chea Tov, 63, said she still harboured "much anger towards the regime", but that she took some comfort in the fact that some senior leaders face the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

"Justice is near. But I want all bad Khmer Rouge leaders to be sentenced to death," she said, adding that the Khmer Rouge killed her husband and 15 relatives.

Khmer Rouge atrocities marked | National news | The Phnom Penh Post

Part of Cambodia's psyche is still damaged by what happened. There is a generation of Cambodians who remember the terror of the Khmer Rouge personally. While there we met a Cambodian who had been left for dead by the Khmer Rouge after he fell from a tree while harvest fruit and they believed he was too injured to survive. They threw him into a pile of dead bodies but his mother rescued him after dark and nursed him back to health, sacrificing her own meager food supply for him to increase his chances of survival. He walks with a limp and has bad shoulder as a legacy, but it is the memory that hurts him most of all.

Some Cambodians are attempting to make the most of the dark times. The country's military has developed extensive experience defusing land mines that were left scattered throughout Cambodia after the paranoia of both the Khmer Rouge and the subsequent Vietnamese occupiers. That experience was not bought cheaply. You see many beggars absent a limb as a result of triggering a mine in the countryside, many of them children. To this day, these mines cause around 35 deaths a month, and already 40,000 people have lost limbs due to land mines. This gives Cambodia the unenviable record of having the most amputees per capita (about one in every 275 people have lost a limb!). Now around 400 Cambodian troops serve in UN peacekeeping forces helping to diffuse mines left behind in other war zones. It is one way that such a tragic legacy of a past conflict can be turned into a heritage mission for future conflicts.

Cambodia has learned from its difficult past and turned those lessons into humanitarian action to serve the people of the world. Since 2006, more than 400 Cambodian personnel have served as peacekeepers in Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic, becoming a part of the UN family in the service of humanity.

Cambodia can be proud of the changes that have made this possible. It is remarkable to see the transition this country has made from being both a focus of UN peacekeeping and one of the countries most affected by mines to becoming one of the global leaders in mine clearance among the UN peacekeepers.

We applaud Cambodia's dedication to providing assistance abroad, to sharing their skills and experience with countries that are still struggling to rid themselves of the scourge of land mines.

Cambodia still suffers from millions of land mines. The country's deminers have developed their skills in these surroundings because they believe that their fellow human beings should not suffer from land-mine accidents.

It is no coincidence that the most land mine-contaminated areas are also among the poorest. Mine clearance is essential for basic activities such as raising crops, and building houses and roads. Without mine clearance, productive land lies fallow while families struggle to get by, and access to markets and services is limited by roads that may be deadly. Skills built out of such necessity have become a highly valued asset.

The Cambodian Millennium Development Goals include one that is unique to this country. The government recognised that land mines and UXO present significant challenges to poverty reduction and added to their goals CMDG9: landmines, UXO and victim assistance. Government's commitment to clearing the country of the explosive remnants of war, as well as to achieving the goals of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty, is commendable.

Hundreds of square kilometres have been cleared in the past 17 years, bringing new hope to those communities

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