Cambodia's ambitious target

Phnom Penh (Cambodia) - Cambodian mine-clearers are vowing that casualties from landmines will fall to zero by 2013, in what they say will be a lasting legacy of the humanitarian work of Britain's late Princess Diana.

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Khem Sophoan, director general of the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC), said ongoing clearance efforts, coupled with the destruction of mines through corrosion, would eventually halt casualties from the deadly wartime legacy. "Casualties from landmines have gone down remarkably," he said. "According to the national strategy, we think that in the next 10 years there will be zero casualties from landmines."

The ambitious target for a country considered to be the most heavily mined in the world would free 6,422 villages, about half of the communities in Cambodia, from the deadly threat. Clearing landmines from Cambodia, Angola and Bosnia were among Princess Diana’s passionate causes before her death in a Paris car crash on August 31, 1997.

The glamorous royal was a tireless supporter of programmes working in Cambodia, including deminers Halo Trust and Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and Concern Worldwide and The Cambodia Trust which provides support for victims, particularly women and children. "When she was alive she joined the fight to ban landmines. Then she raised a lot of money for countries suffering from landmines. The princess's activities were purely acts of humanity," Khem Sophoan said. He said that as the sixth anniversary of Diana's death nears, those acts were moving towards fruition.

Khem Sophoan said the number of casualties before 1998 was steady at about 3,000 a year. In 1999 the rate fell sharply to 1,260, then to 833 for the year to December 2002. He hopes this number will fall below 700 in 2003. "But every casualty is one too many," he said, adding that about 18 per cent of victims were killed.

The campaigner said that between 4,000,000 and 6,000,000 landmines remain littered across the country after almost three decades of civil war which ended in 1998. Previous estimates put the figure at 10 million. Since 1992, deminers have destroyed 180,000 land mines, suggesting the zero casualty target by 2013 is optimistic. Also, the casualty figures do not include deaths and injuries caused by unexploded ordnance (UXO).

Chhiv Lim, director-general of the Cambodia Mine/UXO Victim Information System, agreed that landmine casualty rates had dropped remarkably but the UXO victim rate, while falling, is stubbornly high. UXOs, including unexploded bombs, grenades and rockets, are far more deadly than landmines which were mainly designed only to cause serious injury. Chhiv Lim said that among total casualties, landmines accounted for 70 per cent and UXOs 30 per cent before 1998. Now that figure is about 50 per cent each.

"This figure is not regular. But the biggest dangers occur at the start of the year, when farmers start preparing their fields for planting," he said. Khem Sophoan said no one expected Cambodia to be landmine-free for decades, but by targeting high-risk zones and with the help of favourable weather, zero casualties were a realistic target. Increasing numbers of landmines are being found in a useless state, suggesting that millions could be disabled by corrosion caused by the massive tropical rains of each wet season, followed by intense dry heat.

However, some metal mines have had their shelf life extended by those laying them, who wrapped the deadly weapon in plastic bags to prevent the deterioration of rubber seals. Mines encased with plastic are protected from corrosion but are prone to waterlogging, also affecting their ability to detonate. Khem Sophoan said the highest rate of landmine injuries continues to occur in the former battlefields of this country's west, where the numbers of deminers will be substantially beefed-up. This would be achieved in conjunction with a reinvigorated mine awareness programme aimed at children using cartoons.

"The programmes show different types of mines, bombs and other explosives. People must become aware that these are dangers in everyday life," he said. Khem Sophoan lamented the fact that Diana was never able to visit Cambodia before her death at the age of 37. He said that had she lived she may well have seen one of her dreams realised -- an end to landmine casualties in Cambodia. "I am very sorry for the loss of the princess, if she hadn't died it would have been good as she would have helped save a lot more lives," he said.

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