The northern Cambodian village of Choam Ksant could almost serve as an advert for the charms of the simple, rural life. Red dirt tracks serve as roads, and the electricity supply only flickers into life for a few hours each evening. The houses are meticulously kept, and the scenery is pretty, if not spectacular. Lulled by the tranquillity of the surroundings, you could imagine setting off for a ramble across the fields. Until you see the signs: red background, white skull and crossbones, and - in case you were in any doubt - "Danger: Mines" written in Khmer and English.

(18.03.2005)
The Red Cross estimate there are still as many as six million landmines and pieces of unexploded ordnance (UXO) in Cambodia. They caused death or injury to more than 200 people in the first two months of this year alone.

The world is well aware of Cambodia's problems with landmines. But around half the explosions are actually caused by UXO.

The Mines Advisory Group (MAG), an international mine clearance charity, has a team working in Choam Ksant.

One house where UXO had been found belonged to a former soldier, who gathered the material to use for fishing - a destructive, if not uncommon, activity, which a few weeks earlier had cost him his life.
His widow had found more explosives hidden around the property. One device was covered in an inch or two of earth next to the path used by the rest of the family, well within reach of an inquisitive child.
The MAG team acted swiftly, pushing everyone back to a safe distance, then surrounding the UXO with sandbags and destroying it.

Even 200 metres away, you could feel the force of the explosion, and the sound of the blast echoed off the hills.

Lessons that save lives
While MAG and other de-mining organisations work on ridding Cambodia of mines and UXO, the Red Cross concentrates on educating the population about the dangers.

Local volunteers set up a class on a shady street in Choam Ksant, and a couple of dozen children gathered in front of the banner showing the various deadly devices they might find as they play.

Volunteers put the children through their paces. They were impressively well-drilled in what to do if they come across mines or UXO: "Don't touch it - call for help - tell the Red Cross" they chanted.
First hand experience reinforces the lesson.

The headmistress of the local primary school said children digging a vegetable patch as part of their classes had uncovered a dozen pieces of UXO. None of them were hurt, but another local boy did not escape unscathed from his encounter with UXO.
The diminutive teenager rolled up his trouser legs to show me some lurid burns, then pulled down his pants to display the shrapnel scars on his stomach. At least he survived. The boy he was playing with died.

The Red Cross can warn about the hazards, but many people feel they cannot afford to listen. Choam Ksant has its charms, but its inhabitants are poor, and in the dry season they can not make any money from planting rice. They have to find other ways of bringing in cash, including gathering UXO for scrap.

At the back of a well-kept cafe, a pile of rusted rockets and shells could be seen, waiting for a buyer.

The cafe's owner said she would not accept anything dangerous, and that she was only interested in UXO for the quality metal from which they are made. But already this year there have been several deaths at markets dealing in UXO.
As is often the case in Cambodia, economic imperatives override danger.

Unless poverty is reduced, and until the country is cleared of mines and UXO, the deaths and injuries will continue.


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