

# FEMALE DE-MINERS



**CAMBODIA:** In a ramshackle market in a remote corner of northwestern Cambodia, Leath Chumbory sits on a wooden bench and hurriedly eats her breakfast. The first light of day is beginning to seep between the gaps in the bamboo roof and she is keen to begin work. Leath Chumbory's job is searching for landmines in one of the most heavily mined areas in the world.

**AUSAID HAS BEEN INVOLVED WITH DE-MINING PROGRAMS IN CAMBODIA SINCE 1993.**

The 2003 Landmine Monitor Report says:

- > 5.1 million people in Cambodia are at risk of being injured or killed by landmines.
- > 6,422 villages in an area of 4,466 million square metres in Cambodia are affected by landmines. About 1,640 villages, approximately 12 per cent of all villages, have a high contamination of landmines and unexploded ordnance.
- > Mines or unexploded ordnance may contaminate as much as 2.5 per cent of the country's surface area.
- > Since organised mine clearance operations began in 1992, a surface area of more than 200 million square metres has been de-mined.
- > 61 per cent of the suspect areas are concentrated in the five provinces of Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear, and the Pailin municipality, in the north and northwestern parts of the country.

**RIGHT: Ready for work – the all female team. Photo: Daniele Mattioli**



The landmine problem is particularly acute in the northwestern province of Battambang. The area was the scene of some of the fiercest fighting between Pol Pot's genocidal Khmer Rouge regime and Vietnamese and Cambodian government soldiers. During the battles of the 1970s and 1980s, landmines were an everyday weapon of war. Pol Pot called mines his 'perfect soldiers', so effective were they at causing death

and injury to his enemies.

Like so many people in Cambodia, Leath Chumbory lost most of her family during the Pol Pot regime. Her life since has been a struggle and especially so after the death of her husband. By 1996, she was poverty-stricken and desperate.

But then her life changed.

Chumbory replied to a newspaper advert placed by the British-based mine clearance charity, the Mine Advisory Group,

inviting women in difficult circumstances to train as deminers. She was selected and, after undergoing training in de-mining techniques, began working with a 15-strong female mine action team.

Chumbory's motivations for working in such a dangerous environment are a mixture of humanitarian and financial. She's proud she's helping to clear fields, villages and wells so that those living nearby are free from the threat of explosions. She's also



## BACK ON THE SILK ROUTE

**CAMBODIA:** While governments, aid agencies and other organisations play an overwhelmingly important part in reducing overseas poverty, sometimes it's the efforts of an individual that make a difference. Kikuo Morimoto is an example. He's reviving the ancient Cambodian art of silk making and he is also giving poor women a dignified means of making a living.

grateful for the good salary, which is almost 10 times Cambodia's national average. It means that she, like the other de-miners, are able to support not only themselves but also large extended families. In Chumbory's case, she's supporting her sister's five children.

Cambodia has only one all-female de-mining team. It's currently working in the village of Svay Sor, 60 kilometres from the provincial capital of Battambang Town.

The women search the land methodically, first with a metal detector and then on hands and knees. Each safely destroyed mine leaves a deep crater, into which a yellow wooden stake is placed, marking the spot like a tombstone.

Seng Somala, the team leader, concedes her team has come under closer scrutiny because it is made up entirely of women. She has no doubts, however, that her de-miners can match their male counterparts.

'Men are stronger and sometimes quicker than the women de-miners but women are

more patient and they try harder,' she says.

Seng Somala believes the pilot all-female team has been a model for the whole of Cambodian society, empowering the women and encouraging strong bonds between them. 'They take care of each other and are more confident and vocal,' she says.

'This is a real example of what women in Cambodia can achieve. It will improve the profile of women and promote our position in society.'

As the sun begins to cool on the dusty fields of Svay Sor, the women start packing up their metal detectors, flak jackets and safety helmets and prepare to return to the barracks they share during the week.

**Adapted from an article by Stuart Hughes, Patron of the Mines Advisory Group (MAG)**

**AusAID through World Vision supports the work of the Mine Advisory Group, which is based in the United Kingdom.**

**ABOVE: Leath Chumbory. De-mining requires painstaking care and concentration. Photo: Daniele Mattioli**

When Japanese silk expert Kikuo Morimoto chucked in his job as senior executive in a big international company, he knew he was about to embark on something important. His life is now dedicated to restoring the traditional Khmer silk culture before it vanishes.

Traditional Cambodian silk production was one of the casualties of war. The Pol Pot regime all but eliminated a generation of silk workers. The 1200-year-old craft, along with the forest that furnished the raw materials, was almost destroyed.

Morimoto's 'Wisdom from the Forest' project embraces the entire silk-making process, from replanting the ruined forests and

barren countryside to constructing self-sustaining silk workshops.

In Siem Reap, close to the majestic temples of the ancient Khmer capital of Angkor, 300 Cambodians are learning silk weaving and dyeing techniques under Morimoto's instruction. Many are young women who would otherwise end up begging from tourists or becoming prostitutes.

Morimoto is no naive utopian. He's been a company manager, a refugee worker and UNESCO consultant. His understanding that 'neither art nor hope can exist on an empty stomach', led him to quit his well-paid job to study the economics of cottage textile



FAR LEFT: Babies often accompany their mothers or grandmothers to work in the silk factory, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

LEFT: Weaving silk threads.

Photos: Xavier Lecoultre/Rolex Awards



Morimoto in front of swaths of silk. Cambodia. Photo: Xavier Lecoultre/Rolex Awards

industries. In 1996 he started his own non-government organisation, the Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles, in Phnom Penh. His driving force is to save the craft of silk making.

Realising that traditional skills are about to vanish, Morimoto is working fast. In 2000, he moved his workshops from Phnom Penh, to Siem Reap, so as to learn the ancient art from the few surviving 'silk grannies'.

During Cambodia's ruinous wars, the mulberry trees that fed the silkworms were cut down. Indigo and other plants used for dyes, and even the trees where lac insects make their nests are virtually gone. (Lac insects, when crushed, provide the classic Cambodian royal ochre dye.) Although reforestation is now occurring it's a dangerous process in Cambodia because of landmines.

Khmer silk culture dates back to at least the 8th century, as recorded in the sculptures that adorn the

temples of Angkor. The best Cambodian silk fabrics are made from individually dyed threads, an expensive, labour-intensive process called 'ikat' that no machine can duplicate. At one time, Morimoto says, 'Cambodia's ikat silk was superior to that of Japan or China and silk products held pride of place in the national culture.'

The loss of traditional skills and the mass sell-off of silk treasures during the war, have meant younger generations know very little about this aspect of their cultural heritage.

By resurrecting the silk industry, Morimoto is laying the groundwork for a larger rejuvenation of his adopted country. 'It is crucial,' he says, 'for humanity to learn to live in total harmony with nature. This is as much a universal economic necessity as it is a common spiritual desire.'

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#### AUSTRALIA'S ASSISTANCE TO CAMBODIA

Australia's assistance to Cambodia is in three main areas – strengthening the rule of law, increasing the productivity and incomes of the rural poor (particularly in the agriculture sector), and reducing the vulnerability of the poor to natural disasters. Australia's estimated total overseas development assistance to Cambodia 2004–05 is \$41.4 million.

#### FOR HUMANKIND

Morimoto is a 2004 Rolex Award for Enterprise recipient. Rolex awards are presented every two years for projects in almost any kind of field of endeavour, provided it contributes to the betterment of humankind. The awards aim to encourage a spirit of enterprise in visionary individuals, and give financial support for projects that advance human knowledge and wellbeing.

Anyone of any age, from any country or background is eligible to apply for an award. Applications for the 2006 Rolex Awards for Enterprise are now open. Australian applications are sought.

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