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Clearing Safe Routes

The impact of MAG's work on village life in northern Cambodia





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Liberating the Land

Story & Photograph
by Sean Sutton

Ilias and his grandson Robin with this year's tobacco harvest. "Until recently we couldn't grow anything and we were terrified our children would get blown up. But now MAG has cleared the area, life has changed. We are safe and we now have a livelihood again."

"We were imprisoned on our own land, too terrified to move," says George Kawand, local priest in the Lebanese village of of Saidoun. "It was as if we were all dead."

Saidoun is perched high in the mountains behind the town of Nabatiah in southern Lebanon. The area was heavily fought over during the conflict. When the war ended in 1990 the local population found their village completely destroyed and the area seeded with landmines and booby-traps. Villager Fadi Khawand explains: "We were afraid - especially for our children. We didn't know what was safe and what was dangerous. It was very difficult and dangerous for us to rebuild our village."

MAG worked in Saidoun for nine months, and as well as the manual clearance team, mine detection dogs and a Minecat machine were used here. They helped to reduce the size of the suspected area, identifying the exact location of the dangers.

MAG technical field manager Mikael Bold says, "We used all the tools we had to maximise the efficiency and impact of our work. Firstly community liaison staff worked with the local people to identify the high priority suspect areas, then our clearance assets were put to work. There is still more for us to do here and we hope to return in the near future."

A total of 49,513 square metres of land were cleared and made safe. 94 anti-personnel mines, 9 anti-tank mines and 761 items of unexploded ordnance were found and destroyed.

Fadi Khawand sums up the impact of MAG's work in the village: "We now feel safe," he says. "People who were afraid to come home before are now coming back. Houses are being built and land cultivated. There are even plans to build a hotel up here - the views are so beautiful."

A bell sounds and children's excited voices echo through the dense scrub along the mountain path.

This part of Laos, Nong Het district in Xieng Khouang province is characterised by rolling green mountains and breathtaking views. It is also sadly one of the most bombed areas of the country. Recently MAG, funded by DFID and working in partnership with the Laos and Danish Red Cross, cleared unexploded ordnance (UXO) from school grounds in five isolated villages to the far eastern side of the district, near the Vietnamese border.

The project is a prime example of how MAG shapes community's future prospects. Schools were built in three of the villages following the clearance of the remnants of conflict. In the other two, areas were cleared for school gardens and playgrounds. Often these villages are so isolated that MAG technicians had to walk for up to two hours through the jungle to get there. "Before MAG came we had to warn the

children about UXO before lessons began. Now we are very happy. The children are free and safe to play at break time and some of the classes have started growing crops and vegetation within the school grounds as part of their lessons." So says Douang Chay, teacher at the school in Khaeng Let. There are three teachers at the school, teaching 74 children aged six to 14 years in general subjects including mathematics, Laos language and history.

Chou Phoua Lo is the village head in Kham Pong where MAG cleared 2,000 square metres of land. Today there's a school with three classrooms accommodating children of primary school age from the village and surrounding area. Mr Phoua Lo says: "Before, there was no school and lots of illiteracy in the village. Now the children have the chance to learn and study to make their lives better." Thong, a 20-year-old teacher at the school, adds: "We're all so pleased that MAG have been here. Everybody feels safer and are confident to let their children play."

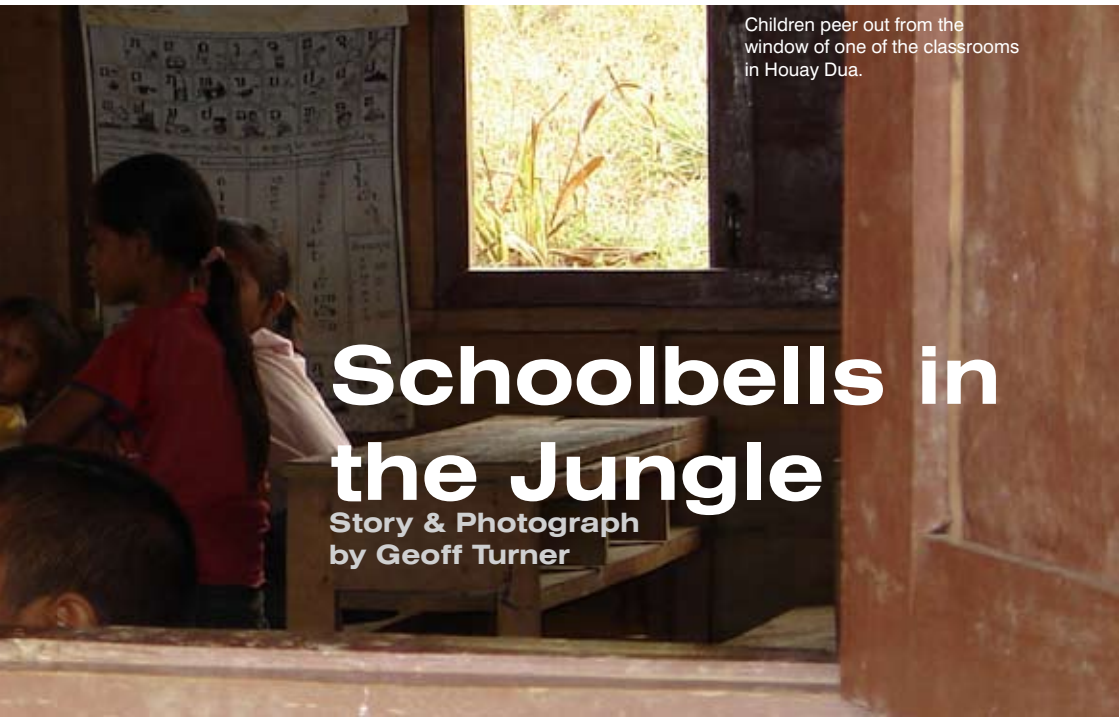


Construction of the school in Bouakser began in May 2005 following the conclusion of MAG's clearance in the village. "The school will make a big difference to the lives of the children," comments the village head, Mr Douang. "We're very pleased with MAG's work here."

"During the war bombs were dropped on the village because there was a military position of the Laos army close to here. The villagers were so scared that they went to live up in the caves nearby," says Bounse, the village head in Houay Dua - he was ten years old at the time. He goes on to describe how. Following the war, the whole village was moved half a kilometre up the mountain. It is on the site of the old village where the school was eventually constructed in 2001. The presence of UXO surrounding the school was an ongoing problem until MAG was called in to clear the area. The school was closed while MAG worked there, reopening again in September 2005 when the clearance was complete.

By far the largest school in the area is at Houay Lom. It has five classrooms and accommodates some 290 children, with a dormitory where children who come from further afield stay during the week. Children come from five other settlements as well as the village, some travelling by foot or on bike for over two hours. Further construction is planned for a teacher's dormitory to also be added in the near future. "UXO was hindering development in the village, so we were very happy when MAG came. Now the children can play safely and learn," says Chua Ka, the village head.

The overriding sentiment from all these villages is similar - the sense of safety is crucial, as is the opportunity for development. In each, the impact of MAG's work means that the youngest members of the community have a real chance for a better future.



Children peer out from the window of one of the classrooms in Houay Dua.

Schoolbells in the Jungle

Story & Photograph
by Geoff Turner

Clearing Safe Paths

Story & Photographs by Geoff Turner

“We knew about the landmines and were scared, but we had no choice,” says Kim Heourn, sitting outside her small house in Spoung, a village in Battambang province, Cambodia, near the border with Thailand.

MAG cleared safe paths through the village thanks to funding from ECHO. This enabled fellow NGO, CARE, to build a water pump and filter pond, giving the villagers a clean supply of water for the very first time.

Kim Heourn is 37 years old and has lived in the village for six years. During the civil war her parents fled the country and lived in a refugee border camp in Thailand. When

the family returned to Cambodia it took them a while to find somewhere to settle. “There was no chance of living anywhere else,” she says. Eventually she moved with her husband and daughter and settled in Spoung with enough land to build a house and cultivate a 30m x 60m plot for farming.

MAG’s work, alongside that of CARE, has had a huge impact of the villagers. Before CARE could get access to build the filter pond, the nearby river was the only source of water and was used by the villagers for bathing and sanitation as well as drinking, causing a lot of illness. Now water from the river is used mainly for watering the crops and not for drinking. “I’m really so grateful to MAG,” Kim explains. “I wish I could give them something in return. Everyone here feels safer and we have access to clean water so we don’t worry about sickness any more.”

The residents of Spoung no longer live with the fear of death and injury that used to go hand in hand with carrying carrying out such mundane and everyday activities as bathing, laundry and collecting drinking water.

Sem Savy emphasises the point. She has lived in the village for five years and runs a small grocery store where she lives with her husband and four children. “MAG has done a proper job here and I feel 100 per cent safe,” she says. “There have been no accidents in the areas already cleared, and I no longer fear for myself or my family while we’re walking along the paths of the village or working nearby.





Living at the edge of a minefield:
Seoung Thy with her children.
Sras Teuchas village

The Kbal Lan minefield runs through the village of Spoung. Between February and August 2005 a total of 2,460 square metres were cleared by two MAG teams. Thirty one landmines and 32 items of unexploded ordnance (UXO) were found and destroyed.

A few miles away in the village of Sras Teuchas, Seoung Thy sits on the porch of her simple home with her four children. Less than 100 metres away a Danger Mines! sign can be seen. “A few months ago I found some strange objects in the rice field behind my house. At the time I didn’t realise that they were landmines, but I reported them to the village head anyway,” she says. “Knowing that more might be buried nearby makes me feel scared for my children.”

Seoung Thy has lived here for seven years and her story is similar to that of Kim Heourn’s. She was a young girl when she was forced to live in a children centre during the Khmer Rouge campaign, and ordered to work long hours in the rice

fields. She later moved to a border camp in Thailand. When she eventually moved back to her home town there wasn’t sufficient land available for farming. Even though she knew that Sras Teuchas had been a battle area, she had no other choice but to settle there - it was the only place that offered her enough land.

MAG has started work making the village safe, much to the relief of Seoung Thy and the other residents. Using a combination of both manual clearance and mine detection dog teams (funded by the Lutheran World Federation and the UK’s Department for International Development) a total of 70 hectares will be cleared, freeing land for agriculture and enabling 18 new families to settle in the area.

“Clearing the area is the first priority for the village,” says Seoung. “Now MAG are here I feel confident about where I live and work. We’ll soon be able to grow more crops and can already walk without fear.”



Airstrip Clearance

Story by Lydia Good
Photograph by Tony Roberts

In the late summer of 2005, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) requested MAG's assistance in the assessment of the airstrip at the remote northern Angola location of Camaxilo. UNHCR had a planned repatriation of 3,000 returnees from neighbouring DR Congo and felt it was vital for logistical and security reasons that the runway be open to air traffic.

Throughout Angola the wartime battle for control of the transport system is still evident today in the number of mined roads and airport runways. Many airstrips were mined to protect defending forces or to prevent the opposing side from using them.

For communities living in isolated areas smaller airstrips are a vital link to the outside world. They rely on them to carry humanitarian personnel, transport food aid as well as to evacuate people in medical emergencies. During the rainy season when high rivers and impassable roads are cut off, outlying areas are almost totally reliant on air transport. In response to the request from UNHCR MAG provided Mine Action Teams and a Road Assessment Team, to enable a rapid response.

An area of 60,000 square metres was cleared uncovering anti-vehicle and anti-personnel mines.

Tony Roberts, MAG's technical field manager for Lunda Norte and Lunda Sul says: "MAG has been pleased to support the Government in Lunda Norte and the UNHCR Repatriation process to Camaxilo district through the clearing of the airstrip in this town. By working in partnership, our work has and will continue to facilitate the return of Angolans to their own country."

The clearance of the airstrip at Camaxilo will open up this section of Lunda Norte, not only allowing residents to travel more easily to other areas of the country, but also to support other humanitarian projects by making the movement of personnel and supplying operational materials easier. Such partnership support to other humanitarian efforts, both those of UNHCR and other agencies, including OXFAM's water and sanitation work, highlights the broad ranging impact of MAG's approach in Angola.

MAG's teams in Camaxilo are funded by the Government of Japan, the European Commission and the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

“I’m glad to be returning land that people couldn’t access for more than 20 years.”

First Lieutenant Hamid Hussein Hassan is one of 50 former Iraqi National Guard soldiers being retrained by MAG in demining skills and explosive ordnance disposal operations. He was in the Iraqi army for more than 17 years and was formerly an instructor in the military college. Having served in both the Iran-Iraq war and the invasion of Kuwait, where he was captured and held as a prisoner of war in Saudi Arabia, he was forced to rejoin the army in 1998.

Today, Lieutenant Hassan says he has found a new life in demining and is well on the way to becoming an instructor himself. Hassan looks forward to further sharing this knowledge, and giving back something positive to the community.

With funding from the United States Department of State Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, MAG is

training and equipping former soldiers from the 14th Iraqi National Guard Brigade, based in Kirkuk. The training programme involves ‘training the trainers’ and operational management training to help maintain sustainability. Once qualified all trained deminers will meet International Mine Action Standards.

Following the training, all necessary equipment and vehicles are also supplied in preparation for the teams’ deployment. These include four-wheel drive vehicles, which also serve as ambulances, medical/trauma kits, detectors, communications equipment and personal protective equipment.

With support from MAG and its donors, Lieutenant Hassan and the former soldiers of the Iraqi National Guard are developing a sustainable capacity to return land to the citizens of Iraq, removing the threat of landmines and safeguarding lives and futures.



Retraining Soldiers for Peace

Story & Photograph by Dan Sissing

“We want the refugees to be able to return to their homes safely, so we explain to them the dangers of the mines and unexploded weapons,” says MAG community liaison officer, Rebecca Waweru. “We talk to them about staying on safe paths - the ones other people are always using - and ask the local community where they can find materials for cooking and building in areas that are safe.”

The town of Kapoeta in South Sudan is set amongst a landscape of abandoned tanks, destroyed buildings and burned out vehicles - but the remnants of a 21 year civil war are increasingly being replaced with evidence of peace. Just weeks before the one year anniversary of the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the first group of Sudanese refugees, assisted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), arrived from Kakuma in Kenya and began the process of resettling in South Sudan.

Recognising that returning communities often do not possess local knowledge of the specific risks posed by landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), the MAG team in Kapoeta arranged to promote awareness and ways to reduce risk among them. Prior to their planned return, we met with members of the Sudanese refugee community and UNHCR to disseminate information about the presence and threat of the remnants of armed conflict in Kapoeta and the surrounding counties. This had been collected by our community liaison teams operating in the area since January 2005. The information enabled the refugee representatives to support their community members in preparing a safe resettlement.

Upon our arrival, MAG community liaison teams provided Mine Risk Education (MRE) to the refugees at their rest stop in Kapoeta town. It focused on enabling

them to seek out areas, paths and roads that are most likely to be safe en-route and on arrival in their communities.

MAG was praised for the contribution we made to the process of refugee return, with one UNHCR representative commenting, “I’d like to thank MAG for their cooperation and hard work. During our trip to Kakuma, the refugee representative specifically asked if we had a MAG staff member with us as they had been impressed by the way MAG had done the mine awareness presentation during their visit to Kapoeta. Teams that are able to deliver trust and build cooperation with other agencies and, most importantly with the local population is a crucial aspect of this operation.”

At a recent MRE training workshop in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a group of 18 participants identified key groups at risk from landmines and UXO. These included returning refugees collecting building materials, women gathering firewood, young boys hunting birds on riverbanks, men using UXO as tools (for example, using a



mortar bomb as a hammer) and farmers clearing their land with fire and hoes.

Participants were encouraged to be as specific as possible to help them decide on what information these groups would need to live safely in affected areas. In addition, the information would help the design of MRE materials, making them as relevant and memorable as possible to the at risk groups.

The workshop, supported by UNICEF, concentrated on data collected by the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre. It was held in Mbandaka, the regional capital of Equateur Province and brought together MRE officers from two local NGOs - Tosalisana and Humanitas Ubangi. Both organisations focus on making refugees, returnees, internally displaced people, settled communities and local authorities all living in contaminated areas, aware of the threat of landmines and UXO and on the collection of information.

“I now feel more confident in making people aware about the landmine and UXO risk. The group helped us to understand very well the different

MRE messages,” said Adele Mbonzo, MRE officer with Humanitas Ubangi.

The workshop was highly participatory, combining group discussions, quizzes, case studies, drama, stories, MRE demonstrations and presentations from the participants. In order to encourage maximum participation, the sessions were conducted in Lingala, the most commonly spoken language in the province. During the week, participants were taught basic risk reduction messages and methods of delivering MRE sessions with few or no resources. They were also encouraged to come up with ideas on what MRE materials would be relevant to communities in Equateur Province and shown how to deliver an MRE presentation for a defined target group.

Jeanine Longongo, an MRE officer of Tosalisana summed up the positive impact the sessions had on her knowledge and implementation of MRE when she said, “All the training was important, but I found teaching through pictures very useful and I can now make my MRE work more interesting to my people.”



Teaching People About the Dangers

Story by Anna Kilkenny (Sudan)
& Annelise Dennis (DR Congo)
Photograph by Sean Sutton



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