

Female deminers do the hard yards



BY HEATHER DOWNIE

She doesn't have the tough-guy persona you'd expect from someone who hunts for explosives. She has a pretty, smiling face and a long, wavy ponytail. Her nails are painted a metallic, sparkling blue and when she talks, her wedding ring catches the sunlight. It's a reminder of her husband and two-year-old son when she's off working in the fields.

Thoun Sokly, 27, clears minefields in Battambang for the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC), the largest demining organisation in Cambodia. For five years she's been working with dogs that sniff out explosives just six kilometres from her home.

"It's difficult, but I'm not scared for me," she says as she flips up her face mask and wipes the sweat and dirt from her cheeks after a long day in the CMAC training fields on the outskirts of Siem Reap. "I'm scared for my son to find them."

While demining has traditionally been a man's job, Sokly is one of a growing number of women dedicated to removing the remnants of three decades of war and conflict that's left Cambodia as one of the most ordnance-filled countries in the world, with a huge number of unexploded landmines to match. Estimates suggest there are 4-11 million unexploded devices in Cambodia. No one is sure.

The battle to eradicate them has been long and arduous. But there is still optimism about the uphill battle, especially from one of the first all-female land demining teams in Cambodia

that will hit the ground to start clearing next January.

The driving force behind the team is Sophin Sophary, a petite girl with pink wire-framed glasses, a bob haircut and a gentle demeanour.

At the ripe old age of 23, she's preparing to lead a team of 10 female deminers for the Cambodian Self Help Demining, an NGO founded by Aki Ra, an ex-child soldier of the Cambodian war turned deminer who established the Landmine Museum in Siem Reap.

After a training course this year, she will be able to blow things up very effectively.

Sophin Sophary oozes passion about forming a band of women. She wants to carry on the dream of Aki Ra's wife, who passed away last year. She believed an all-female team could empower women by making them leaders in their own communities and giving them economic opportunity.

"I want to make women stronger. They can make a difference," says Sophin Sophary.

That's not to say women aren't strong already, especially in the field of demining.

"Women can do the same thing as men ... if not better," says Nem Sowathey, the Phnom Penh-based PR representative for CMAC, which employs 108 women - 15 percent of its workforce.

Nem Sowathey says women follow procedure and don't get cocky or careless. And in the mining world, adhering to protocol can mean the difference between life and death. To date, no woman has had even a single accident on the job at CMAC.

One of the centre's team

leaders in Battambang has even asked for more women on his teams. That's how effective he believes they are.

But hiring more women or men could be difficult. This year, CMAC suspended all demining activities in certain areas for a few months due to a lack of funds. At that pace, meeting Cambodia's goal of eliminating all mines in the Kingdom by 2019 will be difficult.

The history of that target date goes back a decade. In 1999, Cambodia signed the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention agreeing to eliminate all landmines within 10 years. Cambodia didn't meet that December 2009 deadline and applied for a 10-year extension.

"Landmines seem to have lost the spotlight," said Nem Sowathey. "And funding is a serious challenge."

But when Thoun Sokly works, she makes good money: \$228 a month for six hours of work, six days a week. But her work was suspended for the first three months of this year due to the funding shortage.

Sophin Sophary says the promise of a good job helps encourage women from poorer families to become deminers, but a desire to change their country's future is a greater motivator. Her team is already filled with passionate women.

Chron Veasna is one of them. She is a 31-year-old widow who says, "I want to clear landmines because I want to see them gone from Cambodia. I want my country to be safe and be able to develop. We cannot use a lot of the land because of landmines. We cannot farm the land. We cannot build schools for the children. We cannot build roads. Landmines are part of the problem and I want to help get rid of them."

Sophin Sophary's story is similar. She is haunted by memories from her childhood, of a six-year-old girl who died after she went into the jungle to collect wood and rice and encountered an explosion so devastating her body was never found.

Sophin Sophary is also haunted by watching her father being forced to stop farming, cutting off the family income, after finding an explosive in the family's yard.

"I don't want to see that any more," Sophin Sophary says. "The war is finished. Landmines should be finished, too."



Eco-friendliness top of the agenda

BY NICKY HOSFORD

CELEBRATIONS for World Environment Day were held on June 5 at Prek Toal, one of the many floating villages on Tonle Sap Lake. In keeping with the watery location, the principal message promoted sustainable fishing for the protection of future generations.

The UNDP-hosted occasion was supported by Siem Reap NGO Osmose, with financial support from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Osmose has been working toward environmental

awareness in Prek Toal since 1999.

Most of the attendees were students from the local primary and secondary schools who listened patiently to speeches delivered by representatives from the Mekong National River Committee, Community Fisheries, the Ministry of Environment, and the Global Environment Fund.

When it was the students' turn to lead, they did so with a poetry recital expressing their concerns about land, air and water pollution.

A ceremonial tree planting and waste collection on the

riverbank in front of the pagoda helped to reinforce the message of environmental protection and avoiding pollution.

The day's activities were completed by showing five films in front of the village pagoda.

Touching on different themes including gender, HIV, the Tonle Sap and fisheries protection, the films were watched by over 100 young people from the village.

Osmose staff hosted a quiz at the end, with prizes of soap and kramas for the best answers. 20

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