

BY ROBERTA STALEY

San Suo hops down the rough wood ladder leading from the doorway of his one-room house, elevated on two-metre-high wood stilts to prevent flooding during the monsoon season. Hop may seem an odd word to describe San's movements, as the 43-year-old has no legs, just bare brown stumps sticking out of red shorts, the mutilated reminder of limbs that were blown off by a land mine years ago. But hop he does down the grey, weathered rungs, until he is parallel to his wheelchair and can gracefully swing himself with muscled arms onto the wooden seat planks.

It is noon, and the family of six—wife San Nath and the couple's four children—have been hiding from the 35°C sun inside their bamboo-floor home, roofed with dried palm leaf. Gaunt, almost featherless chickens peck in the dirt yard, and a second wheelchair—its seat a cheap plastic lawn chair—lies at the edge of the yard.

At 2 p.m., when the temperature drops a few degrees, San and hundreds of other villagers of Veal Thom, 100 kilometres north of the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, return to their 50-by-300-metre parcels of land. They hack with handmade hoes at the jungle roots that threaten to reclaim soil tamed for jackfruit, papayas, and bananas. San's patch of earth is one kilometre away, uphill. He cannot wheel up the long incline, so his children push him to the field.

Veal Thom, a village of more than 2,000, was created in 2000 by a group of former enemies. Some of these men are ex-Khmer Rouge, an antiwestern, ultra-Marxist movement that, from 1975 to 1979, was responsible for the death of an estimated 1.7 million people, or 20 percent of Cambodia's population, through forced labour, starvation, and execution. Others are former soldiers with the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, a nationalist conservative group that battled not only Khmer Rouge soldiers but the royalist party Funcinpec, led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh.

All of the village men are victims of land mines. They are missing legs and arms. Some are blind.

The existence of Veal Thom is an important and hopeful sign that the country's land-mine survivors are overcoming poverty, lack of government support, and prejudice to create a new life out of suffering and loss. They are normalizing their lives, not only at the grassroots level like the villagers of Veal Thom but on the world stage,



Land-mine survivor Cian Nam sits on his small patch of land in Veal Thom. He must rely on the 50-by-300-metre patch to feed his six children. Christopher Grabowski photo.

Cambodian resurrection

Land-mine victims forge a new pride in an unforgiving atmosphere

gaining prominence as elite volleyball players with disabilities in international competition.

While rebuilding their personal lives, Cambodia's land-mine survivors are also contributing to the recreation of the country's infrastructure, societal fabric, and national pride. When Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen refers to the volleyball players as the country's true national heroes, he, perhaps unwittingly, is referring to all land-mine survivors.

The sight of a legless, armless, or blind man, woman, or child—there are estimated to be 40,000, giving Cambodia one of the highest disability rates in the world—draws little attention in a country long inured to suffering. The nation's dominant religion, Buddhism, adds another bitter layer to the fate of land-mine survivors. Cambodians regard severe injuries and congenital defects as karmic recompense for bad behaviour in a former life. They are shunned by society, mocked with the epithet *kambot*—an offensive term for someone without limbs—and often doomed to homelessness and begging. In an ironic twist, beggars are treated respectfully, as giving them food and money garners the giver karmic merit and less suffering in the next life. Government attempts to denounce this superstition are token, at best, and include large signs posted about the country declaring, "Disabilities are not a sin."

Being karmic lepers wasn't the only reason the land-mine victims of Veal Thom established their own village. The government pension that ex-soldiers were supposed to receive was never forthcoming for many of them, so village leader Touch Soeuly, a Khmer Rouge soldier during the 1980s who lost his right leg to a mine, took matters into his own hands. Touch and the blind and mutilated men boldly claimed 2,000 hectares of untitled, wild jungle, a move that eventually received government blessing. In this case, Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot's antiwestern policies favoured the group. The despot had abolished all private property in 1975, leaving vast tracts of land without legal owners.

Just down the road from San Suo live Nov San, Um Seykun, their nine children, and three oxen, which are hitched to the stilts of the house by a thin rope halter that goes through the nose. Nov and his wife are both 51 years old. His eldest daughter, beautiful, with lush hair and dark eyes, is 18; the youngest child, sweetly asleep in a baby-sized green hammock, is nine weeks old. But it is his vivacious 15-year-old daughter, Sreyot, who bounds out from the shade under the house, embracing

the role of family spokesperson. "Hello! How are you? What's your name? How old are you?" Sreyot exclaims in one excited stream.

Sreyot, one of only three of Nov's children who attend classes at Veal Thom's school, has been studying English for two months and is clearly delighted at the chance to use it. Her father stands off to the side with a genial, shy smile, wearing a white T-shirt that hides the stumps hanging from his shoulders. Nov's arms were blown off halfway up the humerus while he was trying to clear land mines in 1997. He also sports swirls of scars, lighter than his farmer-brown skin, on the right side of his abdomen and chest from the explosion. He is dependent upon his wife and children to help him work the land, tend the oxen, and drink water from a cup.

Although Nov's life may sound bleak, there is warmth, humour, and love in his family, and the children appear well-fed, healthy, and curious. Veal Thom, with its dusty red roads connecting the homesteads, is a harmonious—if isolated—oasis. The oxen must not be allowed to stray beyond the village into the deceptively innocuous-seeming hills, which are still peppered with land mines. And villagers only occasionally must endure the Cambodia People's Party propaganda drive-bys, when motorcyclists rumble along the roads of Veal Thom blasting the party line through a huge megaphone.

If Veal Thom can be considered a successful community, it is also due to assistance from various national and international NGOs, including the Samaritan's Purse and World Relief. These organizations have built wells, a road and bridge, 150 latrines, and a six-room schoolhouse, and bought goats for the villagers. Large dugouts ensure that the tan oxen, used for plowing and pulling carts, have water during December to May's dry season, which shrivels the grass and turns roads into dust bowls. The dugouts also double as swimming holes for children, who shriek and splash happily in the tepid pools, mint green from a mix of red earth and algae.

It is clear that the mutilated men, with their hard faces and their backbreaking struggle to eke a living out of jungle, are discovering a sense of self-worth, and when they crack their rare, beatific smiles, there is even a trace of joy.

This village of some 2,000 individuals is a significant shift from the terror and death that choked Cambodia for three decades. Beginning in 1969, during the Indochina War, clandestine U.S. B-52 bombing raids killed 150,000 Cambodian civil-

ians and turned thousands more into refugees, according to Yale University historian Ben Kiernan. This was followed by Khmer Rouge rule, a North Vietnamese invasion, and finally civil war. A coup d'état as recently as 1997 entrenched the rule of former Khmer Rouge and now Cambodia People's Party leader Hun Sen.

Survivors were demoralized, poverty-stricken, and dependent upon foreign NGOs for basic needs. The country was bereft of infrastructure, schools, and banking and legal systems. The rule of man still takes precedence over the rule of law, and it fluctuates in accordance with the number of riels—the national currency—that cross the palms of police or government officials.

In the decades of struggle for Cambodian hegemony, warring factions seeded the country with antipersonnel mines. Millions were planted starting in 1979, when the Khmer Rouge was driven out of Phnom Penh by Vietnamese forces and Vietnamese-backed State of Cambodia troops. The mines were used to defend military positions, supply routes, border crossings, and roads and bridges from attack by Khmer Rouge guerrilla forces. After the Vietnamese withdrawal in 1989, the Cambodian government and opposition forces continued to rely upon mine warfare. An estimated six million land mines still blight the country, which is roughly the size of England and Wales combined. One of the worst seeded areas is the "K5" belt, a 700-kilometre-long, 500-metre-wide swath along the border of Thailand, contaminated with antitank and antipersonnel mines. According to the *Landmine Monitor Report 2005*—a summary released annually by a global reporting agency of nongovernmental organizations—there are 3,000 mines per kilometre of frontage.

Cambodians' struggle to find a way out of poverty in a preindustrial, agrarian economy is made more difficult by the threat from land mines. The growing population of 14 million, 84 percent of it rural-based, is being forced by land pressures into mined areas. And the casualty rates are rising. In 2004, according to the Mine Awareness Working Group (MAWG), there were 898 new land mine and unexploded ordinance (UXO) casualties, or more than two a day. Of these casualties, 277 were children. In total, 171 people were killed and 727 injured while doing everyday tasks: farming, herding, collecting wood, or travelling. That was a 16-percent increase over the 772 landmine and UXO casualties (115 killed and 657 injured) recorded in 2003. In the first six months of 2005, casualties

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rose to three a day, MAWG reports. Handicap International's 2004 report, *Tampering*, reveals that the increase in casualties is partly due to Cambodians literally risking life and limb to try to salvage the high-quality components in UXOs—many of them still live—that were dropped by the U.S. bombers in the early 1970s.

MEANWHILE, SOME land-mine survivors have turned their bad karma into good on the international volleyball front—with the assistance of Canadian athletes with disabilities.

In 2005, for the first time since the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975, Cambodia was to host an international sporting event: the 2005 Asia-Oceanic Volleyball Championships, with participants from the Cambodian National Volleyball League (Disabled) Organization (CNVLD). Created seven years ago, the league

has 16 teams; residents of Veal Thom are trying to make it 17 by organizing a team, and they have flattened an area for a volleyball court. Seventy percent of the league players, many of them ex-soldiers, were disabled by land mines.

But Cambodia's triumphant return to the world stage as host was nearly wiped out when the tsunami on December 26, 2004, devastated coastal areas of many of the countries—Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and India—that had planned to send teams. Some of the league's athletes were also killed, says Christopher Minko, the Australian secretary-general of the CNVLD.

With only two countries participating, Cambodia and Australia, the tournament would have to be cancelled.

Desperate to see the championship go ahead, Minko wrote to Canada's ambassador to Cambodia, Donica Pottie, asking for assistance. Could she help finance a trip by some members of the world-champion men's Canadi-

an National Standing Volleyball team to Cambodia as guest competitors?

Pottie dipped into her operating budget and, with the addition of some Ottawa money and corporate donations, five Canadian players and a coach jetted to Cambodia. Because five players can't field a team, two Cambodian players, Neang Saron and Heng Thy, were recruited to play with the Canadians, captained by Toronto's Neil Johnson. "It was great to watch how the two players became better and better each game," Pottie says. "It was also the chance to highlight the issue of land mines and give the players a sense of excellence and a belief in their own abilities to be excellent."

Johnson, who led the Canadians to a third consecutive win at the Standing Disabled World Championship in June, says the Cambodian experience was both humbling and inspiring. Although the Canadians dominated, the Cambodians played with a pure joy, "something the Canadian style could use", Johnson, 25, says. "We ended

up learning more from the volleyball players than we could teach them." Johnson was also impressed by the confidence of the Cambodian players. "At one time, the disabled volleyball players wouldn't wear shorts because they didn't want people to know they have one leg. Now they are looked upon as leaders in their towns because they are part of this league."


In recognition of the Canadian support, one club in Kampong Speu, an hour south of Phnom Penh, is now dubbed Team Canada. Minko is also trying to recruit a Canadian disabled volleyball coaching expert to train Cambodia's coaches this year. "We're headhunting and getting the funding together," Minko says.

Canada's contribution to solving the land-mine problem extends beyond supporting sports teams. On March 30, 2006, Ottawa pledged \$7.1 million toward demining efforts in Cambodia. The money goes into a trust fund that is being managed by a board with representatives from

Canada, Australia, the United Nations Development Program, and the Cambodian Mine Action Authority. The money, Pottie says, will go to the areas with the most land mines. According to the *Landmine Monitor Report 2005*, mines, UXOs, and submunitions seed 4.466 million square metres of countryside, putting 5.1 million people in 6,422 villages at risk.

Land-mine victims—the social outcasts of Cambodia—are wrestling a new self-respect and pride in a country devoid of a social safety net and imbued with religious superstition. They are shaking off the national mantle of, as Minko says, apathy, malaise, and melancholy created by war and dependency upon foreign aid. Although the country's painstaking journey toward economic growth and well-being will only proceed with continued bilateral and multilateral assistance, some of the most deprived, the land-mine victims, are at the forefront of this path out of purgatory. ♦

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