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A Personal Story: How Land Rights Affect Families

Chhun Phal An
AUSTCARE Integrated Mine Action Program

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A Personal Story:

HOW LAND RIGHTS AFFECT FAMILIES

Chhun Pal An's personal story shows clearly how wars and landmines impoverish people and that much more than simply removing landmines and explosive remnants of war is needed to improve the lives of citizens.

by Chhun Pal An [AUSTCARE Integrated Mine Action Program]

I was born in Tul Svay Prey village, Sangkat Lek Bram, Phnom Penh city, Kandal province, Cambodia. My life and that of my family changed dramatically in 1975 under the Pol Pot regime. More than two million ordinary Cambodians died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Millions more were displaced from their homes and forced to work in the fields in harsh conditions with little food.

When the troops of Pol Pot's black-uniformed Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh in April 1975, my family of seven was forced to leave our house to live in the forest. I was 15 years old and I can still vividly recall the forest area—Region⁵, Pnom Srok district, Sreak Chick commune, Kok Sess village. The Khmer Rouge had also forced many others there from their homes.

From 1975 to 1979, the black shadow of the Khmer Rouge remained. To the Khmer Rouge, my family and I were “new arrivals,” having been displaced from Phnom Penh. They punished us by forcing us to work in the fields with insufficient or no shelter and little food to eat. We suffered much hardship and punishment during this time, and when I was just 18 years old, my father died from starvation.

Vietnamese troops entered Cambodia in 1979, and the rule of the Khmer Rouge ended. From 1979 to 1984, Vietnamese troops occupied Khmer country, setting up a new government—the People's Republic of Cambodia. The new government developed good relationships with Vietnam and Laos.

On 2 Jan. 1979, when we found we could return to Phnom Penh, my family began our journey home by foot with a small cart loaded with all our possessions—some clothing, one small bag of rice and some spices. Kok Sess village is approximately 400 kilometres (249 miles) from the city of Phnom Penh. The roads were very bad, and it took us more than two months to walk to Phnom Penh. Yet when we arrived, Vietnamese troops prevented us from entering the city. We could only live outside of it; our house was seized by the new government, leaving us no place to live.

My mother was a widow with four sons and one daughter, who were still very young, and we were now homeless. As the oldest son, the responsibility fell on me to look for income to support my family, but because the Khmer Rouge stopped all education systems in



Through AUSTCARE Chhun Pal An works to help mine survivors in his native Cambodia like the one shown here.

Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, I had not finished my schooling, and I had little experience in the workforce.

The Khmer Rouge continued to wage a guerrilla war against the new government (supported by Vietnam). In 1984, the new government created the K-5 belt to protect Cambodia against the guerrilla soldiers and Thai forces. The K-5 belt is a densely for-

ested area on the Cambodian side of the Khmer-Thai border. The new government conscripted one member of each Cambodian family to clear and cut the forest along the K-5 belt and then laid landmines and other ground traps. Work on the K-5 belt was very dangerous—many of the conscripts died from malaria due to a lack of medical treatment and food. Failure to comply with a conscript request resulted in punishment and, in some cases, imprisonment. When I received my letter of request from the village chief in November 1984, my family and I escaped to the Khmer-Thai border camp called the Site Two Camp and became refugees.

We lived there from 1984 to 1987, and then we traveled to live in Koa I Dang Camp, again as refugees. While we waited for our refugee status to be made legal, we were relocated for approximately one year to Ban Thad Camp in Thailand. At the end of one year, we were legally relocated as refugees to Koa I Dang Camp.

During my years in refugee camps, I learned English and found work with non-governmental and international organisations. From 1989 to 1990, I taught Khmer literature and mathematics to secondary school students with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Ban Thad Camp, and from 1990 to 1993, I worked as assistant sanitation director in Koa I Dang Camp with the International Relief Committee.

Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia in 1989; however, Khmer Rouge resistance fighting with the government continued. With assistance from the Australian government and cooperation with a number of other countries, Cambodia signed a peace agreement in Paris on 23 Oct. 1991. This peace agreement ended Khmer resistance and created the State of Cambodia. In 1993, my family repatriated to my homeland, where I continued to support my family through work with non-governmental and international organisations.

In 2002, I was recruited by AUSTCARE for its integrated mine action program. My involvement in this program allows me to work closely with poor people and help them directly. It also emphasizes the importance of land and its centrality to the people of Cambodia, particularly as a basic resource in high demand. AUSTCARE promotes social sustainability and reduces the vulnerability of people who have for too long been landless and poor.

I believe integrated mine action is important and valuable to the people of Cambodia because, by integrating mine action and community development activities, we can ensure the needs of Cambodia's most vulnerable populations are addressed. It is my conviction that this is the surest way to reduce the poverty of people in Cambodia and contribute toward the nation's development as a whole. ♦



Chhun Phal An is currently the program manager for AUSTCARE's Integrated Mine Action Program in Cambodia. He helps mine-affected, poverty-stricken families in the country get a fresh start.

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Chhun Phal An
Program Manager
Integrated Mine Action Program
AUSTCARE
69 – 71 Parramatta Road
Camperdown NSW 2050 / Australia
Tel: +61 2 9565 9106
Fax: +61 2 9550 4509
Web site: <http://www.austcare.org.au>