Landmine legacy: The killing fields still kill

by Dean Peerman in the May 15, 2007 issue

On a recent trip to Southeast Asia, I visited the historic complex of Buddhist and Hindu temples at Angkor, near the city of Siem Reap in northwestern Cambodia. The temples are spread out over 40 square miles; on a two-day look-see, one can do scant justice even to the major ones, such as the 12th-century Angkor Wat, generally considered the greatest masterpiece of Khmer architecture.

On my second day at Angkor my attention was diverted by a band that was playing traditional Cambodian music. Drawn by the unfamiliar but pleasing sounds, I got closer and discovered that all of the ensemble's 12 men and women had been injured by landmines, some having lost more than one limb. And this group is not unique; Cambodia has a number of bands all of whose members are landmine-disabled.

Despite considerable high-level corruption, Cambodia is a relatively stable country after three decades of war and political and social upheaval. However, it continues to suffer the aftereffects of war, and one of the worst of these is the daily toll of new landmine victims. The number is beginning to decline, but each year there are still several hundred casualties, and about a third of these are children.

In this country of 11.5 million people, more than 40,000 live as amputees as a result of mine injuries. That many or more are believed to have died in remote areas before they could be brought to medical centers or before they were found. An estimated 61 percent of Cambodia's mine victims have to go into debt to pay the costs of their medical treatment, and rehabilitation facilities are quite limited. The rural poor are especially at risk; they can be killed or mutilated in the simple act of trying to get water or wood. The notorious killing fields still kill.

The Cambodian Mine Action Centre says that between 4 and 6 million landmines are strewn throughout the country; other estimates range as high as 10 million. Although Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge of the late 1970s was the most culpable, mines were also planted by the Heng Samrin regime, by the Sihanoukists and by the invading Vietnamese. Surely the suppliers of these deadly weapons share the

blame; the CMAC reports that no fewer than 18 countries have been identified as manufacturers of the devices found in Cambodia—including the United States. The country is also rife with other kinds of unexploded ordnance—primarily remnants of the half a million tons of bombs dropped by the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Without the antipersonnel mines and other ordnance, Cambodia could more than double its agricultural output.

Cambodia is hardly alone in being heavily mined. It is estimated that 80 million landmines and other kinds of unexploded ordnance are buried worldwide. At least 84 countries are affected, and mines pose an extremely serious threat to civilian populations in 24 countries, according to the Landmine Survivors Network, a co-recipient of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. Angola and Afghanistan rank close to Cambodia in the number of landmines, and the Middle East has tens of thousands of them. Every 22 minutes someone somewhere in the world steps on a landmine. Antipersonnel mines kill or injure about 18,000 people every year, and as many as 400,000 people live with landmine-caused injuries worldwide. And 54 countries, says the LSN, have approximately 180 million mines stockpiled.

The Mine Ban Treaty—sometimes called the Ottawa Convention—became international law in 1999, after 40 countries ratified it. As of February of this year, 155 countries had signed the treaty. In doing so they agreed not to use, transfer, produce or stockpile landmines. On March 12 Cambodia’s prime minister, Hun Sen, urged the four members of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations that have resisted signing the treaty—Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Singapore—to do so, saying that ASEAN should set an example for Asia and the rest of the world.

Also among the treaty holdouts are three major powers—China, Russia and the U.S. These three also happen to be the countries with the largest stockpiles of antipersonnel mines. The U.S. hasn’t laid any landmines itself since the Gulf War of 1991, but from 1969 to 1992 it sold over 5 million of the devices to more than 30 countries. And though it hasn’t produced any new landmines in 10 years—its stockpile being at capacity—it refuses to agree to a moratorium on such production.

Pressured by the U.S. military, the Clinton administration declined to sign the Mine Ban Treaty at the time it was negotiated, contending that landmines are needed along the Korean Demilitarized Zone. That administration did say, however, that it sought the elimination of antipersonnel mines and that the U.S. would be able to sign the treaty by 2006 if suitable alternatives could be found. Then, in February

2004, the Bush administration announced a policy reversal, saying in effect that it would never sign the treaty.

The State Department gave this rationale for U.S. noncompliance: “Landmines still have a valid and essential role protecting United States forces in military operations. . . . No other weapon currently exists that provides all the capabilities provided by landmines.” Commented Steve Goose, program director of the Arms Division of Human Rights Watch: “We are told the most powerful and sophisticated military in the world must have antipersonnel mines, even though nearly every one of its major military allies has given them up as an outmoded and inhumane weapon of the past.”

Numerous governments and a number of NGOs are engaged in efforts to locate and eradicate landmines, as well as to provide assistance to landmine survivors, many of whom are impoverished and lack adequate care and treatment. But these are enormous undertakings, with enormous amounts of work yet to be done. Antipersonnel mines are relatively cheap to produce and easy to plant, but hazardous, costly and extremely time-consuming to remove. According to a United Nations report, with present-day technology it would take about 1,000 years to rid the world of all of its landmines.