Thanks to the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC), however, Soe and his family may soon live free from the fear of losing a child or a limb to mines. Teams from CMAC have been painstakingly removing mines and unexploded ordinance from around his house since late last year, when mass defections by Khmer Rouge soldiers made work here possible.

AusAID is the biggest donor to an indigenous Cambodian organisation effectively ridding Cambodia of deadly landmines.

Just a stone’s throw away from Cambodia’s dusty, pot-holed “Highway” No 10 stands a small wooden hut. Eight people including Soe Hoem, his wife San Sokhom and their six young children live here, drawing water for drinking and cooking from a putrid pond behind the house. It is in many respects an unremarkable house, seen a million times around Cambodia. Except that in their desperation for land, Soe and San have squatted in the midst of a mine field. Bright red skull and crossbones signs dot the fields around them.

“I know it is a minefield, but I have no land” says Soe, who fled Cambodia in 1979, spending over 14 years in a refugee camp on the Thai border. “I have told the children not to walk far from home”.

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Like much of Cambodia, this spot, 38 kilometres from the northwestern town of Battambang has seen many ferocious battles. Government and Khmer Rouge troops fought backwards and forwards over this territory for years, leaving it littered with mines and other deadly war debris. Using metal detectors and probes CMAC's demining teams have scoured this land inch by inch. In an area less than a square kilometre, they’ve found and destroyed 669 anti-personnel mines and 215 pieces of unexploded ordinance.

Estimates of the number of landmines scattered throughout Cambodia vary from 4 to 6 million. The mines, laid by all sides and factions during Cambodia’s 25 years of civil war kill or maim up to 300 people per month. While relative peace has returned to Cambodia, landmines and unexploded ordnance still litter the countryside, remaining active for decades.

For an adult stepping on an anti-personnel landmine usually means the loss of a leg, or a foot. For a child, it usually means the loss of a life. Most of the accidents occur miles from help. It can take many hours to reach even the most basic first aid posts, that is if the victim survives that long and if they can find the money that is sometimes demanded to take them there.

The Cambodian Mine Action Centre which has undertaken the daunting task of ridding Cambodia of landmines, is an impressive organisation. In a country where many national institutions are weak and the rule of law is shaky, CMAC has developed into a well organised and effective national demining agency, responsible for its own large-scale demining operations and for the coordination of all demining in Cambodia.

A mine is destroyed

Scrape metal and war debris make locating landmines slow and difficult.

CMAC Site Manager Path Pahn and Warrant Officer Peter Ferguson inspecting demining equipment. CMAC found and destroyed 669 landmines on this site alone.
Of its 1800 Cambodian employees, many are ex-soldiers, drawn from all factions and sides in Cambodia's civil war. Not only do they understand the need for discipline and strict operating procedures in the dangerous business of demining, but their battlefield experience gives them a decided advantage in estimating where and how mines might have been laid across various terrain. While they won't be drawn on this, many are undoubtedly removing mines, they themselves or their armies, had once laid.

At the moment, almost all demining is done manually relying on hand-held metal detectors. Dozens of two man teams will work on an area identified as a mine field, checking for booby traps, clipping grass and undergrowth, marking any metal detected, then carefully prodding the soil to expose a mine. It is dangerous work, demanding enormous concentration.

Slowing down the process even further is the high mineral or “laterite” content of Cambodian soil. Metal detectors currently in use will pick up any metal in the ground, be it a mine, a bullet, a discarded helmet, an unexploded mortar shell or simply high mineral content in the soil. In some areas the mineral content is so high, metal detectors are unusable and prodding is the only way forward.

The bulk of CMAC funding comes from international donors who contribute to a Trust Fund administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Australia, which has committed $9 million over three years, is the biggest donor.

Since early 1994, up to eight soldiers from the Australian

{33-year-old Cher Nak stepped on a landmine while fighting near Poi Pet last April.
Defence Force have also worked with CMAC at any one time, providing technical advice and helping develop the capacity of local staff in leadership, administration and management skills. At least two of these soldiers have returned to work at CMAC permanently following their service in the army.

CMAC currently clears 12 square kilometres of land year; a rate which would see it take up to 150 years to clear Cambodia of landmines. To speed this up, CMAC is actively developing and trialing new demining methods and technologies. According to Richard Warren, an Australian ex-soldier now working as UNDP Coordinator at CMAC, a combination of new technologies and additional funding could see Cambodia free of landmines in 60 years.

“There is new technology which is being developed, which if it comes on line will help. There’s a company in Europe which is developing a technology which will allow them to detect explosives in the ground. This means a mine detector will no longer be needed to detect the metal, which in a field with a lot of shrapnel, can help.”

CMAC is also trialing new metal detectors, including one developed by South Australian manufacturer, Minelab Electronics Pty Ltd. specifically designed to eradicate the background noise produced by high laterite soils.

But the technology which offers the biggest quantum leap in the rate of demining is the use of mechanical deminers, large machines, designed to withstand the impact of large amounts of explosives, which can roll over minefields detonating mines along the way.

While aware of the pitfalls of employing such high expense, high maintenance, high technology, CMAC is hoping to conduct field trials of mechanical deminers during 1997.

“All these factors are contributing to changing the potential end date of ridding Cambodia of landmines” says Richard Warren.