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HER JOB COULD BLOW HER TO BITS

And too bad risking her life looking for land mines is the best work this Cambodian woman can get. Jan Goodwin follows in her footsteps. Literally.

Man Malis lies on her belly in the sun-scorched Cambodian dirt. Sweat drenches her face as the 29-year-old tenses with concentration, excruciatingly slowly and gently prodding the parched dust in front of her. Creeping inch by inch, she uses her left hand to steady the metal probe in her right—she cannot let it deviate from a 30-degree angle, lest she push too hard. Then, bingo, she makes contact. She pauses and inhales deeply. A foot in front of her face and an inch below the soil is a Chinese-made type-72 land mine.

Malis knows exactly what this anti-personnel blast mine, which is no bigger than a teacup, is capable of doing. It's designed to maim, not kill. That means it's supposed to blow her arms off, blind her or drive metal shards, parts of her own shattered bones, fragments of shrub branches or even rock and soil into her body like arrows. Should she step on it, she'll lose one or both legs and probably suffer severe abdominal injuries.

"Armies like mines," she tells me through an interpreter. "They're inexpensive [about \$3 each] and hurt a maximum number of people." Malis is part of an elite group of 46 female "deminers." The women work for a nonprofit called MAG, the Mines Advisory Group (which shared in the 1997 Nobel peace prize), and spend their workdays attempting to rid Cambodia of the millions of land mines left behind by 30 years of war. She is among the first wave of women to undertake what is arguably the most dangerous job on earth.

Sadly, for Cambodians like Malis there is no better alternative for earning a living. In Cambodia's war-torn economy, there are few jobs for women, and those that exist do not pay a living wage. Many scrape by selling small mounds of fruit or vegetables, or are forced to turn to prostitution. Consequently, Cambodia now has the highest HIV/AIDS rate in Asia. A growing number of women are also trying to be mistresses, but there is a trend for wives to use battery acid to grotesquely disfigure and blind their competition. The courts rule in the wives' favor.

"Of course I was frightened I'd be injured, my legs or arms blown off," Malis says. "My family was very worried, but in the end, they didn't try to stop me—they know we need the money."

What's even sadder is that U.S. political

leaders seem willing to let armies around the world lay more land mines. MAG lets me tag along to see just how scary this future could be.

4:30 A.M. SOGGY BEDSHEETS AND NIGHTGOWNS

It's still dark when Malis starts her day, but it's already hot and lousy humid, to the point where your knees perspire. She climbs into her thick cotton acid-green uniform and heads outside to splash her face with water from a barrel. This is the only "bathroom" available where she is working, in a remote area of northern Cambodia, a former Khmer Rouge stronghold. Since the cooking fires are not yet lit, Malis and the other deminers will go without breakfast. Thirty of them climb into trucks and bounce along a heavily rutted road to the minefield where they are assigned. In her group are 19 women, ranging in age from 19 to 49, and many, like Malis, are mothers.

A half hour later, we arrive at the spot—a jungle clearing dotted with thatched huts. In the rapid tropical dawn, Malis dons her Kevlar flak jacket and protective steel helmet. The body armor leaves her looking like G.I. Jane—save for the large, white artificial daisies securing her long braid and the brightly polished nails. "At home on vacation, I wear modern styles—heels, makeup," she says. Her coworkers are as interested in fashion and cosmetics as she is; it's just that here they must dress for success a little bit differently.

A Cambodian deminer makes \$200 a month, more than a year's salary for a schoolteacher. So when a vacancy for one of the nearly 400 positions is advertised, thousands of men and women reply. While MAG says there is no difference between the skills of men and women, women do appear to be more patient and have a softer touch, which is key when doing this kind of work. Women like Malis also earn tremendous respect for putting their lives on the line every day. "People tell me all the time how much they appreciate what we are doing, how proud they are of us and how brave they think we are," she says.

8:30 A.M. STEAMY VISORS AND KING COBRAS

The sun is by now broiling. Malis' helmet visor is fogged from the evil humidity, her shirt already soaked. After slithering in the dirt with her metal probe for 15 minutes, she locates a mine. She swaps the probe for pruning shears and begins to cut away the grass and plants, one stalk at ►

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAN GOODWIN





a time. She wipes her slick, sweaty hands on her pants. Then, using her fingers, she delicately exposes the top half of the mine. Her pink nailpolish sparkles in the sun. Her focus is as laser sharp as a brain surgeon's.

Malis has her reasons for doing her job well. "I want to see a Cambodia where my 6-year-old son can run and play, can have a picnic without risking his life," she explains. "My father was starved to death by the Khmer Rouge, and two uncles and my grandmother were killed by torture. My 7-year-old sister disappeared when she became separated from our family as we fled the fighting. I was 6. We were very close, we shared everything. She was holding my brother's hand when the crowd separated them. We never saw her again." Her voice fades away, and her eyes fill with tears. Malis herself lost the top of a finger that year during forced labor under the brutal regime.

The Khmer Rouge killed between 1 and 2 million Cambodians. They also laid mines galore, or scattered them from aircraft. So did the Cambodian army and the invading Vietnamese troops. Two decades later, the country is, along with Angola and Afghanistan, one of the most land-mined in the world. It is estimated that there are up to 10 million mines here—almost one per person. You could step on a mine anywhere, anytime; even suspicion that they are present scares people out of whole regions for good. There is also what is called unexploded ordnance (UXO) to deal with, such as the cluster bombs dropped by the U.S. during the Vietnam War. Put the two together and you get the world's highest per-capita rate of amputees.

But land mines are not the only threat Malis faces. There's malaria, typhoid and tigers. Not to mention king cobras, which can grow up to 18 feet long, rear 6 feet when striking and carry enough venom to kill an elephant. "I'm terrified of them," she says, shuddering. "One time there were two just half a meter away from where I was working. If they bite, you'll die if they can't get you to the hospital in time." How does she cope? "I scream and shout a lot, and beat on the ground to scare them away. If that doesn't work, I spray them with a can of Raid. Snakes don't like the smell."

11:30 A.M. WALK THIS WAY

After gearing up in a flak jacket and steel helmet and signing waivers that MAG is "not responsible for my life or safety," I follow Malis and her partner out into the minefield. We move slowly, carefully heading out over land other team members



have cleared. I place my feet exactly where they place theirs. Thoughts cross my mind. I wonder whether deminers ever have that one off day like the rest of us and aren't as thorough as they could have been. And whether each step I take will be my last.

I ask Malis how she avoids second-guessing her coworkers. "There's a special bond that develops with your partner and the other women you work with," she says. "You learn to trust them completely." And about getting blown to smithereens? "I strictly follow safe operating procedures, I wear armor," she says, but then admits, "I know my luck could run out. There are times when I dream that while I'm prodding, I touch the top of a mine, and it explodes. I wake up soaked in sweat, my heart racing."

MAG has a remarkably safe record: Since 1992, only four deminers, all men, have been injured, the latest last spring (the guy was blinded in both eyes and lost several fingers when he made the mistake of probing with too much force). When a deminer is disabled, MAG pays her or him a pension of nearly \$4,500, the equivalent of 12 years of income for the average Cambodian.

"Of course you're frightened when you hear about the injuries and sorry for the people hurt. But you can't be scared all the time; otherwise you'd never dare to do this work," Malis says.

Much of the time, Malis admits, mine clearing is like watching paint dry. There can be days, even weeks, when hours of probing turns up nothing but tin cans and bottle caps. "That's when your concentration starts to wander," she says. "Then it can be very dangerous—after all, what you think is a bottle cap can easily turn out to be a mine." (Mines can also be booby-trapped everyday items, like shoes.) Other times, deminers may locate as many as 240 mines around a single home. As Khmer Rouge-controlled areas became accessible over the past two years, entire villages of people injured by mines were discovered.

1:30 P.M. KA-BOOM

Lunch consists of cold leftovers from last night's dinner. The women keep it snappy, eating in any patch of shade they can find. Then it's time to get back to work.

Clockwise from top left: What's smaller than a bread box; a MAG mine-awareness billboard; Sun Un, mother of seven, lost a leg and her husband to mines; Malis at a wedding reception; and with her hubby on vacay

When Malis first discovered the mine earlier today, she marked it with a bright yellow stake so it could be avoided by others. Now it's time for her to signal Seng Somala, 34, MAG's first female supervisor. Somala is responsible for educating communities, particularly children, about landmine safety and has been demining for six years. "I've found so many mines, I no longer keep count of them," she says.

Somala has the graceful build of a ballet dancer. She also gets to do the final, scariest move each afternoon of using firing caps and coils to detonate the mines right where Malis and the other workers find them. "That's the riskiest time," she says. "When I'm doing this, I know they could accidentally blow." Moving or attempting to disarm them is far too dangerous, and blowing them up means they can't be recycled by anyone for fishing, poaching tigers, protecting property or settling scores.

Somala must also deal with each day's discovery of cluster bombs and the like. She'll move the bombs to a hole that she then packs with a charge of explosives and covers with sandbags. After alerting everyone in the area by loud-speaker to move out, Somala sets the fuses. "Then I have to escape myself," she says. "My biggest fear is that as I'm running, an animal—a deer, cow, even a dog—could trigger an explosion before I've gotten to safety. That would be my last day. I try not to think about it."

3 P.M. QUITTIN' TIME

Demining is a slow job. On average, only 30 square meters a day can be cleared by each worker (cost and the dense jungle vegetation prohibit the use of demining tractors and tanks, which would just get trashed by anti-tank mines, anyway). So Malis, Somala and the rest of the crew have to live for years in villages near the sites.

At day's end, they are trucked back to simple wooden homes. From 3 o'clock on, it's all about chores and cooking the evening meal. There are no microwaves or running water or convenience foods. One of Malis' housemates stalks a chicken and kills it. Guess what's for dinner.

If the women are lucky, a small but noisy generator will supply a couple of hours of electricity, enough to operate a fan or two. Tonight, candles dimly illuminate the geckos and foot-long lizards that scuttle across the ceiling beams. Creepy. By 9 p.m., it is time to hit the dormitory-style canvas camp beds or the plastic mats on the bare wooden floor. Weekends are more of the same, or catching up on sleep and laundry.

It's in her downtime that the distance from her husband and son gets to Malis. Visits to family take place only three times a year, during festivals, because the hometowns of

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most workers are at least a day away from the remote clearance site. "It can be very lonely without my husband and my child," she says. "I also worry about my son, because I am not there as he is growing up." And while she and her coworkers are segregated by gender in their housing, her husband, a police officer who earns \$16 a month, is not. "I worry that he could find someone else," she admits. "Sometimes I ask him. But he says no, he loves me. And so I hope."

It could take 100 years to clear Cambodia of mines, estimates Stephen Bradley, an adviser to MAG (you can donate to MAG at www.mag.org.uk). The situation worldwide is similarly depressing: The International Campaign to Ban Land Mines in Washington, D.C.—the other winner of that 1997 Nobel peace prize—says there could be 200 million mines lurking out there. The U.N. ratified the Mine Ban Treaty in March 1999. Like any international agreement, it contains loopholes, the most odious one permitting anti-tank mines to be fitted with light-sensitive devices designed to explode when deminers like Malis brush soil away. Still, 140 nations have managed to sign the treaty.

We Americans now share a hard-earned understanding of the lingering impact of terror. Pol Pot's death ended fighting here three years ago, yet mines still injure at least 80 Cambodians a month. "You know, the worst thing about them," Malis says, "is that long after the fighting is over and peace is declared, the mines still continue to fight a war." ■



The women live
away from their
families for years.