

DECADES OF WAR HAVE TAKEN TOLL

Cambodians find hope in hard life

Military works to remove millions of deadly mines

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (CP) — As the United Nations struggles diplomatically to hold "free and fair" elections in Cambodia, Canadian Lt.-Col. Georges Focsaneanu has a down-to-earth concern: 300 people a month killed or maimed by landmines.

"We're looking at 25 years or more to get this country mine-free," the burly Ottawa known across Cambodia as "Col. Fox" said in an interview.

"People use mines in Cambodia like we use locks on garages in Canada."

The bluff combat engineer commands 215 Canadian peacekeepers in the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia — UNTAC.

He is also a driving spirit in the Cambodia Mine Action Centre, or CMAC, a handful of highly trained military men assigned to remove mines — perhaps as many as four million of them — from the fields, roads and jungles of Cambodia.

"This job is absolutely critical, yet UNTAC has no mandate to remove mines, CMAC has no money, and efforts to raise money so far have met with dismal success," Focsaneanu said.

An adjunct to the massive UN operation to organize elections

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— Lt.-Col. Georges Focsaneanu

scheduled to begin May 23, CMAC is feverishly training hundreds of Cambodians to safely probe underbrush and fields for mines.

Despite the peace agreement signed in Paris in October 1991, the job is not getting any smaller.

"It's not only absolutely essential we remove the mines already laid, but that we get the factions here to stop laying mines," Focsaneanu says.

Ceasefire regulations require the four warring factions to disarm and identify minefields, but Focsaneanu says the Cambodian army, the Khmer Rouge and others have laid as many 100,000 new mines in recent months.

The outspoken colonel says the United Nations should make CMAC an independent unit that would continue working after other UN peacekeepers go home. "You cannot even think of

developing an infrastructure without the removal of mines," Focsaneanu says.

"There can be no bridges if the roads are still mined, no more agricultural land until the mines are removed and no land for industrialization until the mines are removed. De-mining is absolutely essential if this country is to grow."

The task is gargantuan.

Working in highly dangerous conditions — the smallest mines can blow a leg away to the knee; the largest vaporize their victims — three-member teams creep across known minefields centimetre by centimetre.

CMAC has no explosive-sniffing dogs, so only word of mouth and haphazard maps indicate where mines may lie.

"That can mean we have no idea within 400 metres where the fields begin," Focsaneanu says.

If the Cambodia Mine Action Centre gets the authority and the money, it plans to deploy 40 demining units of about 36 members each, 10 mine-marking teams of four or five people each, and several two-man explosive-disposal teams across Cambodia.

TONLE BATI, Cambodia (CP) — Thong Phan is a city person, spending a leisurely afternoon on a bamboo raft 50 metres into Lake Bati southwest of Phnom Penh.

Only 35 kilometres from the capital, Lake Bati is more than two hours by car over pot-holed pavement and sand tracks from the bustle of the teeming city.

Life is slower here, and grindingly poor and hard.

Small children — those who have not lost limbs to landmines — run naked. Older kids wear worn undershorts or rags across the loins.

Adults are slightly better dressed, but only city visitors like Phan have U.S. dollars or Cambodian riels in their pockets. In fact, on a weekday few besides Phan have pockets.

On weekends, thousands of people flock from Phnom Penh to the lake, to enjoy its cool breezes and swim in its brown water.

During the week, the lakeside palm-thatched huts shelter hordes of children and adults displaced and distressed after decades of civil war in Cambodia.

To the north, south, east and west, the scene in villages and on farms is the same: ragged children, one-legged men, and women — lots of women — scabble meagre livings from an unforgiving landscape.

Phan, city born and bred though he is, knows the hardship.

Old enough to have seen Cambodian independence in 1954, Prince Sihanouk overthrown in 1970, the triumph of the murderous Khmer Rouge in 1975 and the Vietnamese march into Phnom Penh to set up a government in

1979, Thong Phan is a survivor.

During the Khmer Rouge terror, Phan concealed his smattering of English and Tagalog — he had been a driver for the Philippine Embassy — and spent four grinding, fear-ridden years wandering and being force-marched through the countryside.

A sister narrowly escaped from the killing fields of Choeung Ek, where 20,000 intellectuals, doctors, nurses, teachers and officials were systematically massacred by the Khmer Rouge.

"There are too, too many like me," Phan says softly. "Too many who died and too many who disappeared, almost too many to count."

In the still beautiful countryside, starvation, disease and landmines kill and maim daily.

Cambodia is a mess. Roads are barely passable. Farmland is sown with mines. The Khmer Rouge destroyed hospitals and schools. There are not enough teachers, doctors, civil servants, engineers or other professionals and technicians to get the country moving again.

Literacy is minimal, personal safety ephemeral.

The government installed by Vietnam in 1979 began a slow rebuilding, but a decade of rampant corruption, without international recognition and now with no money even to pay civil servants left infrastructure crumbling.

The Khmer Rouge are still killing people in the countryside, and various groups are stirring up hatred against Vietnamese-speaking Cambodians.

Still, Phan and other Cambodians believe — or maybe just hope — that peace can come.

The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia has 22,000 peacekeepers in place, and plans elections for May 23.

About 100 other international groups have thousands of workers and volunteers pulling to repair the damage of decades of civil war.

Hong Kong Sikh unit winds down

HONG KONG (Reuters) — The faint rays of colonialism still flicker on Hong Kong's Stonecutters Island, a sleepy military backwater manned by a tiny army unit of Indian Sikhs.

The 35 men guarding Hong Kong's ammunition dump on the island are the last of a kind. Their detachment, the Army Depot Police, is the only remaining Sikh unit attached to the British army.

In 1997, when Britain formally hands over Hong Kong to China, they will be forced to find jobs elsewhere.

For now, the Sikh unit owes its existence to a curious quirk of history and the strict dictates of the Sikh religion.

"We are not allowed to smoke," says Inspector Sarjit Singh, a stocky Punjabi who heads the unit and has lived on Stonecutters for 34 years. "It's against our religion."

When Singh explains how the Sikhs came to be on the island, it's clear why he takes it so seriously.

"Before, they (the British) had Pakistanis to guard here. But sometimes there were fires because the Pakistanis smoked."

The British were at a loss for reliable custodians for their explosives. Then someone suggested the Sikhs.

"Many Sikhs came from Shanghai in 1949," Singh said, referring to a flood of refugees sparked by the city's takeover by victorious Chinese communists.

Some Sikhs, who had been the backbone of Shanghai's police force, heard the British were looking for non-smokers for a special army detachment. "The British knew the Sikhs from their experience in India; they made a good impression," Singh says.

Some of his men have foreign passports and plan to leave Hong Kong before China takes over. Singh hopes to join his daughters in Canada. Others have no choice but to stay.

"They will be allowed to work in Hong Kong after 1997, but I'm not sure what they will do," said a British army spokesman.

In the distance, ocean liners glide through Hong Kong's channel to berth near the busiest container terminal in the world. A dizzy procession of commuters jams the streets of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island.

But on Stonecutters Island, the drill is relaxed — no marching ranks or screaming subalterns; just a handful of uniformed men checking passes and carrying out routine morning checks.

Not far from Singh's office, elegant colonial buildings dot the hillside, including the "Geisha House" used by Japanese army officers for what history terms "recreational purposes" during Hong Kong's 1941-45 occupation.

The Sikhs spend most of their days maintaining watch over the ammunition.

"It's a good job, guarding the ammunition, patrolling the hills," says Singh.

"But I don't know what will happen on 30th June, 1997."

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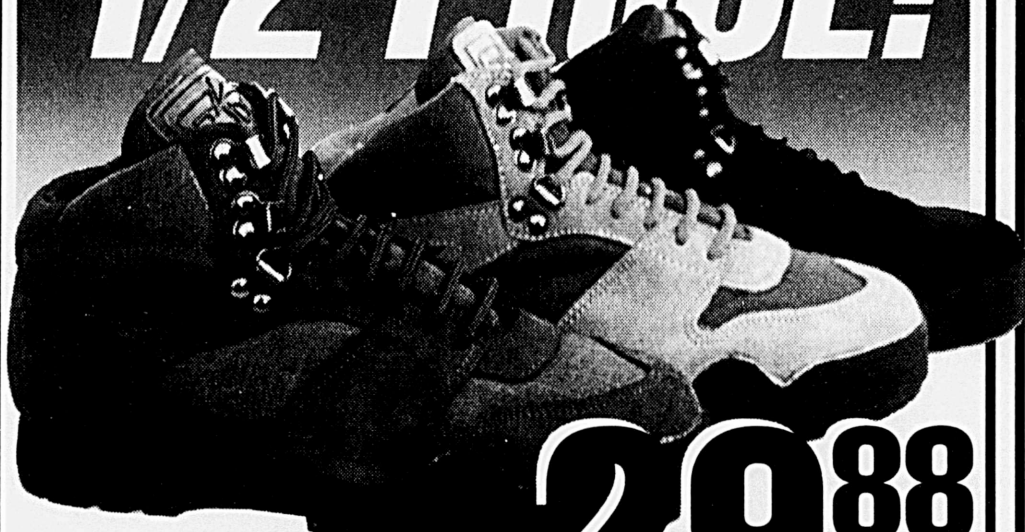
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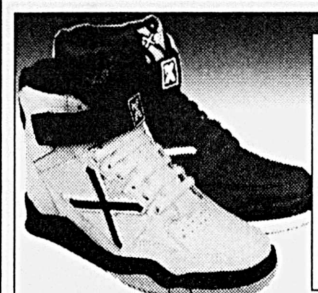
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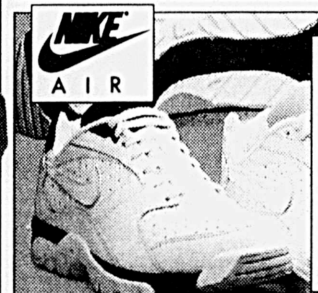
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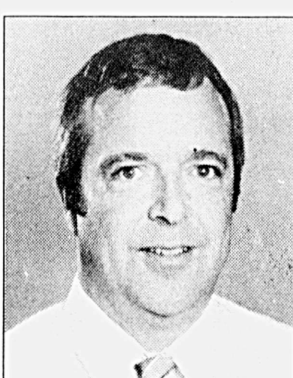
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