

CAMBODIA

The child soldier who digs up landmines

A former Khmer Rouge child soldier in Cambodia now clears landmines by hand and cares for children hurt by war.

WHERE	Siem Reap
WHO	Aki Ra, a former child soldier turned deminer, and the children he took in
WHEN	1975 to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Aki Ra does not know exactly when he was born. His parents were killed by the Khmer Rouge, the regime that ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. He grew up in one of its camps and became a child soldier. As a child, he laid landmines.

Later he fought for the Vietnamese army, and then for Cambodia's own army. He kept laying mines. By his own account, one day he was ordered to mine a field. Instead, he buried at least 50 of them in a pit. He decided to spend his life removing mines.

> **I cannot forget that stuff.**
>
> AKI RA, ABOUT THE MINES HE LAID, TO THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

A stick and bare hands

In the 1990s, the United Nations taught him to clear mines. Then he carried on alone, with a knife, a hoe and a stick. He crept up to a mine, prodded its side, and lifted it out by hand. He cleared mines where villagers asked him to, and where he had once laid them.

He kept the defused mines at home. Tourists heard about him and came to look. By 1999, he was charging a dollar to see them. That became the Cambodia Landmine Museum.

In villages, he also found children hurt by mines, or left alone. He took them home. Over two dozen children have lived with him and his wife. The museum's money pays for their food, clothes and school.

50,000

mines he says he has removed since 1992, by his own claim

9.5 million

square metres cleared by his group since 2008, says Humanity & Inclusion

300

people killed or hurt by landmines in Cambodia, January 2006 to August 2007

Praise and doubt

Large demining groups did not always like his methods. He kept no records, and he had no formal education. A manager at one group, HALO Trust, said Aki Ra was promoting himself.

An official of Cambodia's mine authority said he admired him. The same official said he had received many complaints.

Officials jailed him briefly in 2001 and 2006 for clearing mines without a licence. In 2008, his group won full certification. In 2018, he was arrested for showing defused weapons without permits, and the museum closed for three months.

Aki Ra says he has nightmares, and that loud noises frighten him. Cambodia hoped to be free of mines by 2025. It has extended that goal three times.

How it unfolded

- **1975** The Khmer Rouge take power in Cambodia.
- **1979** Vietnamese forces drive out the Khmer Rouge. Aki Ra is taken into their army.
- **1999** Aki Ra starts charging a dollar to see his defused mines.
- **2008** His group wins full certification as a demining organisation.
- **2018** He is arrested over museum displays. The museum closes for three months.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

A child who was made to lay mines chose to spend his life taking them out. The story does not make him a saint. It shows a man trying to repair what he took part in.

Experts doubt his methods, and his numbers are his own claims. Still, villagers welcomed his help, and the museum's money feeds and schools children.

OUR TAKE

Some people answer a terrible past by choosing, every day, to undo some of the harm.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Repair what you can

Aki Ra clears mines in places where he once laid them.

Try this: If you have caused harm, look for a way to put some of it right.

2 Start with what you have

He began with a knife, a hoe and a stick.

Try this: Begin with the tools at hand, and learn as you go.

3 Listen to critics

Big demining groups doubted his methods, and he later won official certification.

Try this: Take criticism seriously, and improve your work.

4 Look after the people harmed

He took in children hurt by mines or left alone.

Try this: Care for the people who are hurt, not only the cause.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

The past cannot be undone, but a person can choose what to do next.

Sources

The Christian Science Monitor
A former Cambodian boy soldier defuses his past (Annie Linskey, 2008)

Humanity & Inclusion US
Dedicating his life to mine clearance: the journey of Aki Ra, a former child soldier (2023)

Wikipedia
Aki Ra

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story. They are partly based on Aki Ra's own account, which the Christian Science Monitor calls "foggy and inconsistent in places". His age: Wikipedia says he was born about 1970 or possibly 1973; Humanity & Inclusion says his identity card gives 1 January 1975 and that he says he is 50; the story gives no age. Child soldier: Humanity & Inclusion says he laid his first mines at 5 or 6; the Monitor says he was an orphan and a boy soldier; Wikipedia says his parents were killed by the Khmer Rouge and that he was raised in a camp; the story says only that he laid mines as a child. The Monitor says he laid mines sometimes to kill animals and sometimes to kill villagers; the story does not repeat this detail. The buried mines: the story of being ordered to mine a field and burying at least 50 devices in a pit comes only from Aki Ra's own account in the Humanity & Inclusion article; we found no independent confirmation, so the story says "by his own account". UN training: the Monitor says 1994; Wikipedia says he found work as a deminer with the UN in 1991 and left in 1992; the story says only "in the 1990s". The 1979 move to the Vietnamese army is from the Monitor and Humanity & Inclusion. Methods (stick, hands, no records, no formal education) are from the Monitor; the knife and hoe are from Wikipedia. The dollar fee in 1999 and the home-based collection are from Wikipedia; the Monitor says he opened an informal museum in his home about ten years before 2008. Children: Wikipedia says he brought home over two dozen children and that museum funds go to their care; it also says 29 children live at the museum's relief centre, a count that changes over time, so the story says over two dozen. Numbers: the claim of up to 50,000 mines since 1992 is Aki Ra's own (Wikipedia); 9.5 million square metres (about 2,350 acres) cleared since 2008 is from Humanity & Inclusion, which supports his group; 300 killed or injured by mines between January 2006 and August 2007 is from the Monitor, quoting a Cambodian victim-information system. Criticism and praise: the HALO Trust manager's remark and the Cambodian official's mixed comments are from the Monitor (2008), and may no longer describe his work. Jail in 2001 and 2006, the 2008 certification of his group

and the 2018 arrest and three-month closure are from Wikipedia only. Nightmares and loud noises are from the Monitor; the 2025 mine-free goal extended three times is from Humanity & Inclusion (2023). Wikipedia says that in December 2024 he left his group and began a new organisation; the story leaves this out. The Asia Society and SOFREP pages could not be opened (403). The pin shows Siem Reap. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.