

**Manx Links...** a series in which Cheryl Cousins from the One World Centre talks to local people, who have lived or worked in the developing world, about remarkable people they have met!

I was stomping my way over our Islands windswept hills at the weekend... as if for the first time. Having recently spent some time in conversation with Jane Pearn I found myself valuing my freedom to roam in a whole new light!

You mention landmines in Cambodia and many people will remember the photograph of Princess Diana in a bullet proof jacket smiling to the camera; but Princess Diana was not the only woman to brave the mine fields. Jane Pearn from Ballaugh has also been there and visited an all women's team, the second such team in the world to become qualified deminers.

Jane became involved with Manx Landmine Action in 1999. At this time Churches Together in Mann took the initiative to support MAG (Mines Advisory Group – based in Manchester) to commemorate the new Millennium, showing their solidarity with those who do not have the freedom and security that we take for granted. Since then the IoM Overseas Aid Committee has matched their fund raising pound for pound so that the overall total sent from the island is now over £89,000.

Samloth, on the border with Thailand, was identified as one of the most urgent areas in need of clearing, with 10,000 refugees pouring back to reclaim their homes and land after the war. It was on her third trip to that area that Jane met with Neone Roth who was one member of the team of the women deminers. For Jane there is not just one individual that impressed her, but the very team itself. They could have been any group of chatting, giggling, women, traveling on their way to their work but as they donned their protective gear they became methodical, systematic professionals whose lives were at risk in their extremely dangerous job of “litter picking”

Cambodia suffered US aerial bombardment in early 70s during the Vietnamese war, with devastating effect upon the local population and leaving 100,000 lb's of bombs unexploded. From 1975 the Khmer Rouge were in power for 4 years resulting in a quarter of the population being killed or starved to death with widespread famine, followed by murderous civil war. Throughout this period mines were used as a terrorist weapon, or as cheap sentries for the surrounds of camps, the approaches to a well, along main transport routes, roads or the banks of a river. Mines are known as “area denial munitions” and they keep a country locked in poverty. They keep people off good productive land, they prevent children from going to school, they prevent communities from meeting together, because they live in fear.

With dealers coming from Thailand, the price of scrap metal is now going up and, in the face of relentless poverty, 8p a kilo is seen by some young men as a risk worth taking. One of the most common injuries is the loss of the lower arms as someone reaches to pick up a mine.

Most of the women deminers have first hand knowledge of the devastation that landmines can cause. These women, now in their 20's -40's have spent their young lives in refugee camps in Thailand, they have memories of the hardship and atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, and yet, at risk to their own lives. they have volunteered to be trained as deminers to help in their local communities, MAG has developed a policy of offering training to widows and amputees to put skills and money back into the local community, helping local people to clear their own village. They have an active policy of recruiting illiterate and disadvantaged people and training them with dual skills so that their training is transferable. Their work has broken cultural norms, the women are now often the wage earners supporting their extended families, they are away from home for the week traveling distances and living as weekly boarders in wooden dormitories... in accommodation provided by Manx Landmine Action!

One of the team Chanh Saren said that "Before I joined MAG I was a medic with the ICRC in a border camp. I treated many mine casualties. Now I am the trauma medic in a Mine Action Team. We must clear all the mines; there are so many orphans and widows because of mines.' In a country that is still far from stable Jane was impressed by the optimism and dedication of the mine team, On her visits she takes out goods for an orphanage, and comes back with hand woven silk goods that complete the circle of support. The goods are made in a rehab centre providing work for mine survivors, and the profits go back into mine clearance and training.

Jane's experience in Cambodia has strengthened her commitment to her work raising awareness on the Island of the great injustice of landmines, and ensuring that "the money goes into clearance not crutches". If you would like any more information about this project please contact Jane Pearn on: [jane.pearn@btinternet.com](mailto:jane.pearn@btinternet.com)