Progress goes on show
Sport and art combine to celebrate a decade of Cambodian success in landmine clearance and victim rehabilitation

Turn back the clock 12 years and what do you see? The Khmer Rouge, the spectre of Pol Pot, a nation awash in weapons and landmines and no positive international representation – especially in the fields of sport and art.

Now spin forward to November 2008, and the coming exhibition of Cambodia’s “To Be Determined – At Arms Length” at the Palais de Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. The exhibition showcases the positive steps the nation has made to overcome the challenges faced since 1996 through the perspective of its sporting – it disabled athletes.

The exhibition is curated by Chris Minko, Secretary-General of the Cambodian National Volleyball League (Disabled) (CNVLD). Chris designed exhibitions in Australia for many years before coming to Cambodia to direct his energies towards the country’s disabled athletes.

For Minko, the exhibition has been a 10-year labour of love. “It’s a privilege and an honour to be able to present an exhibition of dignity that will showcase Cambodia to the broader international community in a positive light,” he said.

Many nations plagued by war or civil conflict can learn a powerful lesson from how Cambodia is successfully dealing with the horrendous legacy of landmines and warfare,” says Minko. Rather than dwelling on the misery and destruction caused by landmines, the exhibition focuses on how nations and their people can overcome any tragedy given the chance.

It has been enlarged since its first showing at the Wat Phnom exhibition centre in 2005, which attracted over 50,000 visitors, and now includes seven photo-graphic essays by internationally recognised photographers such as Luke Duggleby, Hacky Hagemeyer and John Vink of Magnum Photos, as well as Chor Sokunthea and Michael Huber from Germany.

“As we have seen in Cambodia, sport and art can provide a practical use as the leg of a bench of international aid,” explains Minko.

While the exhibition will focus on the journey of a country, an organisation and a group of people who have been inextricably linked by circumstance, it aims to significantly affect the lives of the vast number of ordinary Khmers, said Minko.

When placed in its wider context, “To Be Determined – At Arms Length” documents the journey of a country, an organisation and a group of people who have been inextricably linked by circumstance. It shows what can be achieved when people are respected and given opportunities rather than handouts.

The exhibition and its tour have been organised under the patronage of Cambodian prime minister Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, with help from the Cambodian, Swiss, Australian, German and Canadian governments.

The CNVLD was created in 1996 and became a local NGO in 2004. Its programmes were initially designed to meet the rehabilitation needs of the thousands of Khmers who are victims of landmines and unexploded ordinances (UXO). A national volleyball league for the disabled, following an Australian model, was then developed. This has been very successful with athletes training and playing like professionals in search of cash prizes.

Recently, wheelchair racing has been added to the disabled programme, cultivating further public interest and giving many more athletes, including women, the opportunity to join an Australian model.

This innovative approach to dealing with disability has won the CNVLD recognition from international organisations like the UN and the Swiss Academy, and the international business community in Cambodia.

The CNVLD is currently breaking new ground by developing corporate partner-