

EXHIBITION

Progress goes on show

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



All arms and legs: Cambodia's volleyball team in action (main), and some of the country's used prostheses (right)



Turn back the clock 12 years and what was Cambodia's image? 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 heroes – its 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.

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. It shows how the country is successfully dealing with the legacy of landmines and weapons by using sport as a catalyst for rehabilitation and reconciliation, and allowing people, formerly thought of as victims to re-enter society with pride through participation in our sporting programs," he said.

The current exhibition will debut at the signing of the Ninth meeting of the State Parties in progress of the Nairobi Action Plan in Geneva.

Afterwards,

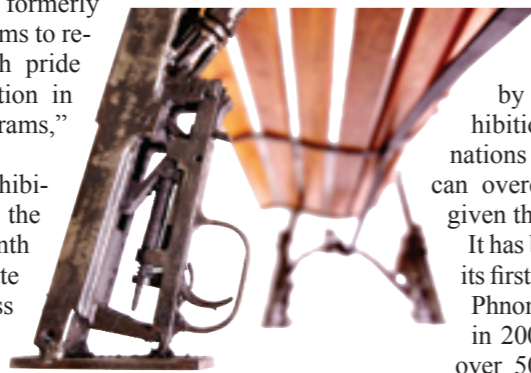
it will make a five-year international tour, with visits to Kosovo, Northern Ireland, Australia, South Africa and the United States, including the UN headquarters in New York.

"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.

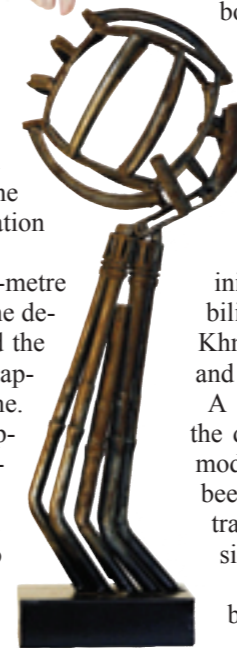
Rather than dwelling on the misery and destruction caused by landmines, the exhibition focuses on how nations and their people can overcome any tragedy given the chance.

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 photographic 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. Hu-



Safety catch: a decommissioned AK-47 finds a practical use as the leg of a bench



Armed art: Don Bosco's sculptures create a thing of beauty from the beast of conflict

ber, a rehabilitation engineer at Heidelberg University, has been travelling to Cambodia for 10 years to document the CNVLD sports and rehabilitation programs.

The photo essays and 120 six-metre photo and text banners chart the development of the CNVLD and the Cambodian government's weapons destruction programme. There are also 35 original sculptures (including a large kangaroo) constructed from decommissioned AK-47s and built by the students of Don Bosco in Phnom Penh with the help of Australian artisans.

People entering the exhibition will walk past rows consisting of 2000 used Cambodian prostheses, which bear silent witness to the landmine issue.

"To Be Determined – At Arms Length" is designed to confront a difficult issue in

an optimistic and often humorous way, without resorting to the gruesome images you would normally associate with landmine injuries.

It provides a graphic insight into the lives of those who participate in the CNVLD through a focus on their achievements rather than their tragedy. Showing how something positive can be taken from even the most negative of circumstances and how people can positively change their lives in the face of incredible adversity – given the chance.

The strong sense of optimism and achievement is in stark contrast to the clichéd and dishonest "begging bowl" images of Cambodia that have been used for years by other organisations in their desperate efforts to raise funds.

The message is that these are people with a disability from a nation that was itself disabled 30 years ago, but their lives are progressing in the same way that Cambodia is recovering. Images of wheelchair athletes wrapping their calloused hands before going out to train reflect the pain of that transition; images of achievement reflect its success.

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 true 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 in.

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-



Fighting fire with fire: some AK-47s fall victim to the weapons destruction programme

ships with companies in the belief that commercially sustainable aid programmes are the only way forward for permanently improving the lives of the disadvantaged in Cambodia.

Prescient companies, such as ANZ Royal and BHP have also recognised the benefits that come from displaying some corporate responsibility in the countries where they are making their profits.

"This is both an exciting development in Cambodian aid as well as a sad reflection on the failure of current aid structures to fund organisations like the CNVLD, or 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.

Jimmy Baeck