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## Cambodia Takes to the Roads in Building Spree

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SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA — Bullet by bullet, workers removed the detritus of Cambodia's past. They pulled 300 land mines and 30,000 rounds of ammunition from the red dirt and then laid down a thick layer of asphalt. Today, what would pass for a very ordinary road in wealthier parts of the world is precious pavement for a country motoring toward prosperity and trying to leave its bloody past behind.

Last month, the government inaugurated the newly refurbished Routes 5 and 6, both built during the French colonial era to connect the capital, Phnom Penh, with the Thai border.

Western Cambodia was the last holdout of the Khmer Rouge, the brutal regime toppled three decades ago. Rebel units held onto remote areas into the 1990s, skirmishing periodically with government forces and leaving the roads in total disrepair, a moonscape of potholes and mud that gave travelers sore backs and made for a crater-dodging, head-bumping ride.

Now enjoying the dividends of peace, Cambodia is halfway through a road-building spree with 10 projects totaling 1,173 kilometers, or 730 miles, of pavement still under way, said Prime Minister Hun Sen, who presided over the ceremony on Dec. 28. A further 11 major roads are under negotiation, he said.

The new roads make the storied temples of Angkor Wat a comfortable drive from the Thai border — and a short day's drive from Bangkok. The roads also put more remote historic sites — in a country filled with them — within easy reach for tourists.

Roads are a big deal in Cambodia, and more than 5,000 villagers were summoned to attend the road's official inauguration — farmers who arrived by bicycle, monks with freshly shaved heads, children in school uniforms. Organizers stenciled messages onto large banners strung across the canopy that gave shade from the searing sun: "Where there are bridges and roads there is hope."

Cambodia's road-building program is now taking "elephant steps, not mouse steps," Mr. Hun Sen told the crowd.

Like the North-South Expressway in peninsular Malaysia, the American-built Friendship Road across Thailand's northeast and the vast network of roads built by China over the past decade, roads are a key milestone of development in Asia.

For Cambodia, in particular, good roads help bring together a country fractured by civil war.

"This section was a very heavy battlefield," said Pheng Sovicheano, the project manager of the road to the Thai border.

Mr. Pheng Sovicheano, who is also Cambodia's deputy director general for public works, knows firsthand how bad the road was. During construction his driver drove into what looked like a large muddy pothole but turned out to be a small pond, flooding the car up to his chest.

Now, as a measure of Cambodia's national reconciliation, some of the 360 workers Mr. Pheng Sovicheano hired to build the road were former Khmer Rouge soldiers.

Roads are expensive — \$350,000 per kilometer for the road to the Thai border. But with many countries jockeying for influence in Cambodia the government appears to have no trouble finding financing. China is building a number of roads here, including one that passes through the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Pailin.

Route 5 and Route 6 were financed with a low-interest, 32-year loan by the Asian Development Bank in Manila, an institution whose largest shareholders are Japan and the United States. South Korea is financing other road projects.

Mr. Hun Sen seems to enjoy playing these donors off each other. In his speech he chided the Asian Development Bank for its sluggish and bureaucratic two-year bidding process and praised the speed of Chinese projects.

"I compliment the way the Chinese companies work — very fast," Mr. Hun Sen said, pointedly glancing over at the representative from the Asian Development Bank.

Political ties between Thailand and Cambodia have been strained by a territorial dispute near a 900-year-old mountaintop temple, Preah Vihear, but officials made no mention of the troubles.

Economic ties endure: By the end of this year western Cambodia will have three good roads leading to Thailand, connections that the government hopes will increase trade and investment. Western Cambodia gets most of its electricity from Thailand, and the company that built the road to the border, S.P.T. Civil Group, is based in Thailand. (The company has ties to Thaksin Shinawatra, the Thai prime minister deposed in the military coup of 2006 who last year was named Mr. Hun Sen's economic adviser.)

The new roads will make it easier for Thai companies to sell more cement, instant noodles and other products across the border. For Japanese companies, the roads will link the supply chains of factories in Bangkok and in Ho Chi Minh City.

And for villagers in western Cambodia, it may help lift rock-bottom incomes.

Yong Da, a 39-year-old deliveryman in the town of Kralanh, has more than doubled his income because of the new road. "The road was bumpy, and I could not take much stuff on my motorcycle," he said. He now makes \$2.50 a day, up from a dollar a day.

The sheets of dust that enveloped the roadside are also gone, and villagers say their children no longer have trouble breathing.

Good roads and the end of the civil war have allowed villagers to take back the night. Travel after dark was discouraged two decades ago because of poor security and the perils of bad pavement.

But with modernity comes another type of danger. Mr. Pheng Sovicheano says he was driving to Phnom Penh one night recently when he came upon a road accident.

A young man had been killed on his motorcycle when he rammed into the back of a poorly lighted truck. The boy's distraught mother blamed the good road, Mr. Pheng Sovicheano remembers.

"She said, 'Before, when there were bad roads, he never drove this fast.'"