



Living **in the shadows**



ACID ATTACKS
IN CAMBODIA



A REPORT BY LICADHO | 2003

■ **FRONT COVER PHOTOS**

by Tang Chhin Sothy:

A young Cambodian acid attack survivor with a towel which she wears over her head whenever she goes outside of her house, to conceal her badly-scarred face. Another acid survivor at home with her younger sister, an apsara dancer. Both survivors were permanently blinded by acid.

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Living in the Shadows: Acid attacks in Cambodia

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Cambodian League for the Promotion of Human Rights (LICADHO)



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chapter one: INTRODUCTION

Bophal¹ is aged only 24, but feels like she is just waiting to die. Every day is a day of pain, suffering, misery and humiliation for her. Three years ago, someone poured two bottles of acid over her head and body. Today, her face, arms and back are covered with horrible scars, and half her head is bald. She spends her days crying and hiding from the world, afraid to go outside. She is not dead but not fully alive. “Now, I am half human and half ghost,” she says. “The person who did this to me, why didn’t they kill me right away, by shooting or stabbing me? Why did they let me live, in this condition?”

■ *What are acid attacks?*

Throwing acid is one of the worst crimes that a person can commit. The perpetrator usually does not want to kill the victim, but wants to do something worse than murder – make the victim suffer forever. Acid melts human flesh and even bones, causing excruciating pain and terror, and leaves the victims mutilated and scarred for the rest of their lives. Some suffer permanent disabilities such as blindness.

Acid throwing is usually an act of revenge, motivated by jealousy or hatred, because of a personal relationship problem such as a broken love affair or marriage, unfaithfulness, or rejection. The perpetrator blames the victim for the problem, and wants to inflict as much physical and mental suffering as possible. The acid is usually thrown at the victim’s face. The perpetrator wants to destroy the face and make the victim look like a monster, so nobody will love the victim ever again.

Other reasons for acid attacks, in some cases, have included robbery or disputes between neighbors.

Acid throwers act cruelly and deliberately. Acid attacks are usually not spontaneous acts of anger. The perpetrator must plan the attack by obtaining the acid, carrying it safely, and stalking the victim.

For victims, acid throwing is a type of torture which never ends. As well as permanent physical damage and scarring, victims suffer many other long-lasting problems. They feel sad, worthless, worried and ashamed. They may become very lonely, because other people stare or laugh at them or blame them for the acid attack. Victims may never marry or have children, and even simple tasks like going to the market may be embarrassing and frightening for them. They may not be able to work, or nobody will give them a job, so they become very poor and struggle to survive.

No-one deserves to be attacked with acid. Victims should not be blamed. They need good medical care and help to rebuild their lives, and should have the same work, education and other opportunities as everyone else. The perpetrators of acid attacks should be arrested and punished according to the law, in order to give justice to victims and acknowledge their pain and suffering.

¹ Not her real name, to protect her privacy.

■ *How big is the problem, and why does it happen?*

At least 44 acid attacks were reported in Cambodia in a three year period up to November 2002, injuring 60 people and killing three others. This means an average of one attack every 25 days. Licadho collected these statistics from newspaper reports, and the real number of acid attacks may be higher. Not all cases may be reported in newspapers.

Nearly one third of the people injured in acid attacks are not the intended victims. This is because acid is a messy weapon, and other people nearby the victim at the time of the attack are often injured accidentally as well. For example, two young boys were badly injured in an acid attack which killed their mother. In another case, a woman threw acid at her husband but it also hit her own 5-year-old son.

The targets of acid attacks are mainly women, but men are also deliberately attacked. Both men and women commit acid attacks.

Most attacks are perpetrated because of family or personal relationship disputes or problems. The most common types of attacks are:

- Wives throwing acid against their husbands' mistresses or second wives: to take revenge and destroy the appearance of the victims so that the husbands will not stay with them;
- Husbands throwing acid against their wives or former wives: usually to punish them for some alleged mistake or because of jealousy or anger about a separation or divorce.

A less common but especially disturbing type of attack is women who throw acid at their husbands because the husbands beat and abused them. This shows what can happen when domestic violence is not stopped, and victims feel they have no other way to protect themselves.

Acid throwing highlights serious problems in Cambodian society and families. The root causes of acid attacks include high levels of violence and social problems within society, and widespread discrimination against women.

Decades of war, genocide and poverty have damaged the morals, Buddhist principles and family values of people and created much violence and crime in society. Many people use violence as a way to settle problems or disputes. Violence is common within families, as well as social problems such as alcoholism, marital quarrels and infidelity. Some men beat and abuse their wives or take mistresses or second wives. Women have little power to stop misconduct by their husbands or get justice for it. In these circumstances, people resort to throwing acid, rather than peaceful and lawful means, to express their jealousy and anger or to try to resolve their problems.

Women are often the targets of acid attacks, which indicates that society often blames women – rather than men – for family problems. Even women perpetrators may blame other women, rather than the men who are involved. For example, an angry wife is far more likely to throw acid at her husband's mistress than at her unfaithful husband.

Other factors contribute to acid attacks, including that acid is a cheap and easy weapon to obtain and use, compared to guns, knives and grenades. Another problem is Cambodia's weak police and court system, which is corrupt, ineffective and poorly resourced. Acid throwers and other criminals may be able to avoid justice, especially if they are richer or more powerful than their victims. If perpetrators are not punished, it encourages other people to think that they can commit the same crimes with impunity.

Without strong action against acid throwers, the number of cases will probably increase and the reasons for attacks will grow more varied. Already, it is not only family problems which lead to acid attacks. In a few cases, other reasons for attacks have included robbery or personal quarrels and disputes not related to family matters. Hospital doctors say they have also seen some cases related to land or property disputes.

Cambodia should learn from other countries such as Bangladesh, where lack of punishment of perpetrators has been blamed for a big increase in acid violence in recent years. As acid throwing became more common in Bangladesh, the types of victims and the reasons for attacks increased. Previously, acid was nearly always thrown only at girls or women by jealous or angry men. Now, more than 30% of victims are men and land disputes are one of the biggest reasons for attacks.

■ *What type of acid is used?*

Acid throwers mainly use sulfuric or nitric acid, which are two of the strongest acids and can eat through the skin, muscle and even bones of humans.

Sulfuric acid is very common because it is used in car and motorcycle batteries. Battery acid is heavily diluted, so that it is 75-80% water, and weaker and slower to burn if it touches human skin. Acid throwers prefer stronger, undiluted sulfuric acid. Undiluted sulfuric acid sells in Phnom Penh for about 3,000 riels a liter, and diluted battery acid for 500-600 riels per liter. Sulfuric acid is also sometimes used to make vinegar, although health authorities have cracked down on this because it is poisonous, or to clear blockages from plastic plumbing pipes.

Nitric acid is used in Cambodia by goldsmiths to purify gold, separating it from silver and other metals. One liter sells for about 6,000 riels.

Another type of acid, hydrochloric, may also be used by acid throwers but not so commonly. This type of acid is used in Cambodia to polish jewelry and to make soy sauce, as well as to turn yellow-vine collected from forests into powder used for cosmetics and traditional medicine. Hydrochloric and sulfuric acids are also used to illegally produce amphetamine drugs, which is believed to occur in Cambodia.

In early year 2000, Phnom Penh municipality took action to prevent acid attacks by instructing the police to warn acid vendors not to sell strong, undiluted acid except to licensed businesspeople who use it in their work. But the ban has not been fully enforced, and acid throwers still manage to buy strong acid.

One battery acid shop owner in Phnom Penh says that at least two or three people a week come to ask to buy undiluted acid. He says he knows that they want the acid for “bad purposes”, so he refuses. But not all acid sellers may care who they sell acid to, and what it is used for.

chapter two: **CASE STUDY OF AN ACID ATTACK**

One day in May 2002, a mother in Kompong Cham told her 13-year-old son to go with her on a moto to a nearby village. The mother, who also carried a plastic Sprite bottle, stopped near a small rented house and waited with her son. A young woman, who was 8 months pregnant, walked out of the house to buy some sour fruit at a stall nearby. The mother gave the Sprite bottle to her son, and pointed toward the young woman. The son did what he was told. He ran over to the young woman and doused the liquid in the bottle over her face, with some of it splashing over her arms and pregnant stomach. The boy raced back to his mother, who was waiting for him on the moto.

Whether or not the young boy realized what he was doing, the liquid in the Sprite bottle was acid. The mother had deliberately used her son to attack her husband’s mistress. The boy and the mother rode away on the moto, leaving the victim screaming as the acid ate into her flesh. Her face burned and turned black, and her eyes and one of her ears were burnt away. The victim’s mother ran to help her daughter, and called a moto-doup to take her to hospital.

The background to the attack began two years earlier when the victim, named Sophea², was aged 18 and working as a restaurant beer girl. She became friends with an older man, aged 34, a moto-doup driver who took her back and forth from her rented house to her work. Sophea told the man her story about how she came from a poor family in Prey Veng province to work as a beer girl in Kompong Cham. The man says that he listened to her story and felt pity. Later, he began a relationship with Sophea, even though he was already married and had two children.

² Not her real name, to protect her privacy.

The relationship lasted nearly two years before the man's wife found out. The wife asked her husband to stop the affair, but he did not. The wife also went to Sophea's home and told her to stop seeing her husband. However, the husband and Sophea continued their affair.

After Sophea got pregnant, she and the man ran away to live together in Prey Veng province. Four months later, relatives of his wife followed him and persuaded him to return to Kampong Cham to reunite with his wife. The man went back to his wife but continued his affair with Sophea, who also returned to Kampong Cham from Prey Veng. The man lived with his wife but secretly visited Sophea at her new rented house.

On May 24, 2002, the wife found Sophea's new house and saw that her husband was there. The wife angrily slapped the face of Sophea, who was 8 months pregnant. The husband, angry and embarrassed, slapped his wife back and she left.

The next day, the husband returned to his wife's house. His wife blamed him, and he did not listen to her but walked away to play billiards with neighbors. About noon, his brother came to tell him that Sophea had been hit by acid.

After the attack, Sophea was taken to Kampong Cham provincial hospital and the police arrested the wife and her 13-year-old son. While in police custody, the wife suffered health problems and the police sent her to the provincial hospital. The wife and her victim Sophea both stayed at the same hospital, but in different wards.

The next day the police sent the case to the provincial court, which interviewed the suspects. Because of health problems, the wife was sent back to hospital but her son was sent to prison.

The wife's father hired a lawyer in Kompong Cham town. The lawyer and the perpetrator's husband, who had the affair with Sophea, persuaded Sophea's mother to drop the complaint in return for compensation. Sophea's mother received \$100 once and another time 100,000 riels. Court officials agreed to drop the case, even though the law states that a criminal case cannot be settled by a private deal outside of the court.

On June 12, the 13-year-old boy who threw the acid was released from prison. His mother took him and her second child to live in another place.

Sophea spent seven weeks in hospital. She was permanently blinded in both eyes, and her right ear was almost completely burnt off. Her face was badly scarred, as well as her right shoulder and arm.

Six weeks after the attack, Sophea gave birth to a baby girl. Sophea could not see her daughter but she counted the baby's fingers and toes and touched the ears, eyes, nose and mouth to make sure everything was all right. She had feared that the acid would affect her baby, but the child seemed fine. Sophea looked after her daughter carefully and lovingly, lulling the baby to sleep in her arms. However, Sophea's small happiness did not last. Four days after the birth, the baby got a high fever and convulsions and died. The cause of death is not clear.

After being discharged from hospital, Sophea lived with her mother, who is divorced, in the rented house. The hospital asked for 200,000 riels for Sophea's treatment but agreed to waive the charge because she was poor. But her mother had still spent at least 50,000 riels for medicines for Sophea while she was in hospital. At home, Sophea and her mother struggled to survive. Sophea depended on her mother to pay for food and other expenses, and the money from the perpetrator's compensation was soon spent. The earnings of Sophea's mother from selling jelly dessert (chahouey) every afternoon were not enough.

The perpetrator's husband stayed with Sophea while she was in hospital and afterward. The man said he does not expect his wife's relatives will ever forgive him. He said he has nothing in his hands and doesn't know how he will survive. His wife and her father took everything in the house when they moved to live somewhere else. The man may lose his land and empty house because he cannot repay an ACLEDA debt that his family had borrowed to do small business. The man decided to stay with Sophea and try to find some work, but he worried that hunger would make him become a thief or robber.

Four months after the acid attack, while on a trip to Phnom Penh for follow-up surgery, Sophea's mother abandoned her daughter and ran off with a new boyfriend. The mother and her boyfriend returned to Kampong Cham to remove possessions from the rented house and then went to live in Prey Veng. Two months later, after an argument, the mother threw acid in the face of her boyfriend. Fortunately, the acid was weak battery acid and did not blind him or cause serious injuries. Police wanted to arrest the mother but her boyfriend asked the police not to.

Finally, the mother returned to live with Sophea and the perpetrator's husband, who remained in Phnom Penh when the mother ran away to Prey Veng. With support from an NGO, Sophea rented a house to live in. But the landlord was rude to her and gossiped about her, because she was an acid victim, so Sophea had to move to another rented house whose owner was more sympathetic.

Sophea faces a life of difficulty and poverty. She has to learn how to live without her eyesight, and her face is badly scarred forever. Sad and hopeless, she spends a lot of time crying and does not know how she will survive.

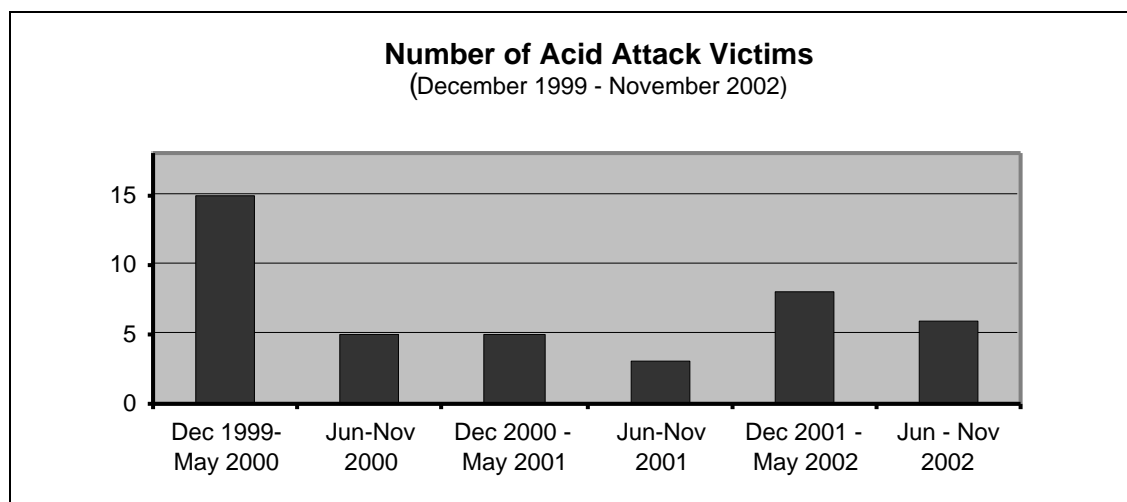
chapter three: **STATISTICS FROM NEWSPAPER REPORTS**

■ *How many attacks are there?*

At least 44 acid attacks were reported in local newspapers in the three years between December 1999 and November 2002.³

The attacks occurred in Phnom Penh (24 cases), Kompong Cham (7 cases), Kandal (4 cases), Prey Veng (2 cases), Battambang (2 cases), and Kompong Chhnang, Kompong Thom, Siem Reap, Kompong Som, and Kompong Speu (1 case each).

The frequency of the attacks, divided into six-month periods over the three years, is shown in the graph below.⁴



As the graph shows, many attacks were reported between December 1999 and May 2000 – a total of 15 attacks, which is 35% of all the reported attacks over the three years. Six of these attacks occurred in the month of December 1999, the highest number of attacks in any single month in the three years period.

³ Licadho began recording acid attacks reported by two newspapers – Rasmei Kampuchea & Koh Santepheap – in December 1999. For this report, additional information about some cases was taken from other newspapers or from Licadho's own investigations.

⁴ The graph excludes two acid attacks, which occurred in October and November 1999 but were not reported in newspapers until after December 1999.

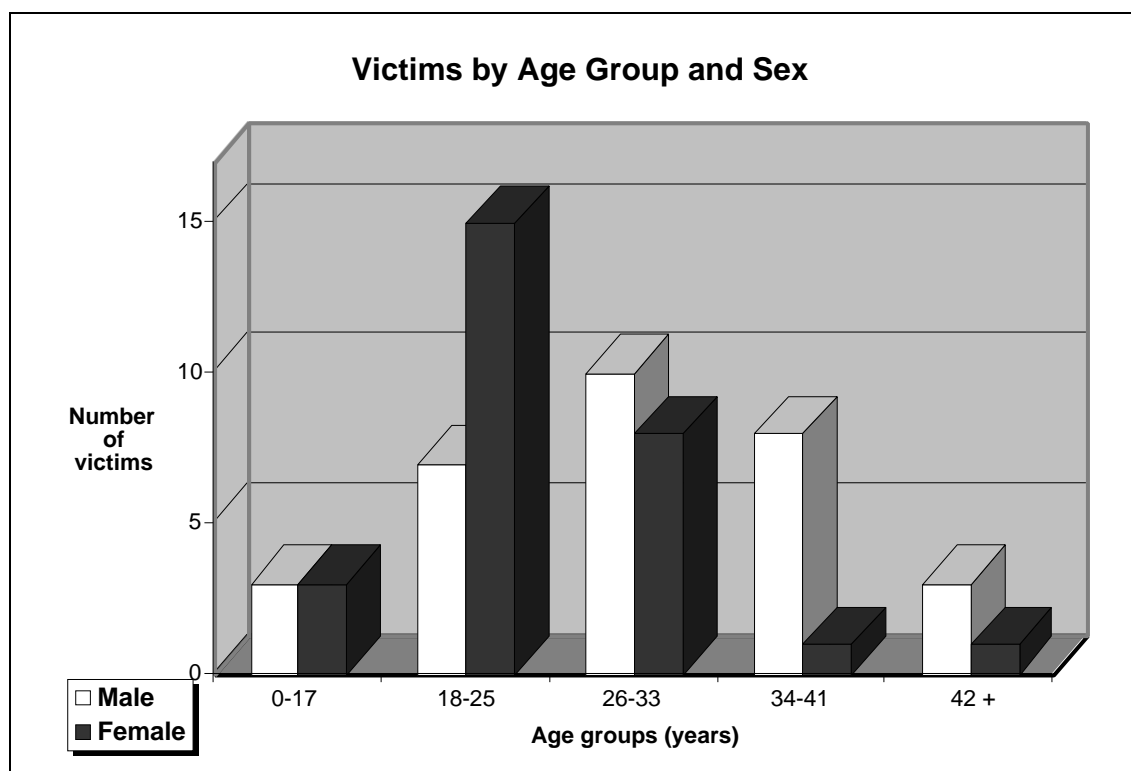
It is impossible to be sure why so many attacks were reported around this time. However, it could be connected to an attack on karaoke singer Tat Marina committed on December 5, 1999. There was a lot of publicity about this attack and the fact that the alleged perpetrator and accomplices were not arrested and brought to court. It is possible the actual number of acid attacks did not increase after this case, but that journalists were just more interested in reporting on every case which occurred. However, it is also possible that the Tat Marina case did contribute to a real increase in attacks, as more people believed that they could throw acid and would not be punished by the law.

■ *Who are victims of acid attacks?*

Of the total of 63 people hit by acid in the three-year period, 31 of them were male and 30 female (plus two victims whose sex was not reported in newspapers).

At least 18 of the victims (29%) were not the intended targets of the attacks but were injured by chance. They included friends or family members of intended victims, moto-doup drivers transporting the victims at the time of attack, and other people nearby. The 18 people comprised 12 males and four females (plus the two victims whose sex was not reported), which shows that more women were deliberate targets of attacks and more men were injured by chance.

The females hit by acid ranged in age from 4 to 45, and the males from 5 to 53. Most victims, male and female, were aged between 18 and 33 (see graph below⁵). The average age of female victims was 24, and the average age of males was 29.



Six minors (aged under 18) were among the injured. There were two cases of girls, aged 16 or 17, deliberately attacked by women who suspected the girls of having relationships with their husbands. The other four children, aged between 4 and 12, were all injured accidentally during attacks. The youngest victim, a 4-year-old girl, was one of six people injured when a woman threw acid at her husband during a child's birthday party.

⁵ Graph excludes two female victims whose ages were not reported.

WOMAN THROWS ACID ON SON

Phok Veasna, aged 32, attacked her husband with acid at their Phnom Penh house in 2002 after hearing rumors that he had a relationship with another woman. Her husband was badly burned on the face and chest. Some acid also spilt over the couple's five-year-old-son. Veasna was arrested and detained, and her husband and son taken to hospital. Veasna told police that she had no intention of harming her son, but the acid splashed on to him. Neighbors said they did not see or hear about the husband having a new wife, and wondered why Veasna acted in a foolish way because of a rumor.

■ *Who are perpetrators of acid attacks, and why?*

Out of the total of 44 reported acid attacks, 23 cases involved female perpetrators, 17 involved male perpetrators and four were unknown.⁶

Most of the attacks (32 out of 44 cases) were allegedly committed because of family or personal relationship problems. Another six cases were committed for other reasons, and there was no information reported about the motives for the remaining six attacks. (See table below).

PERPETRATOR'S MOTIVES IN 44 ACID CASES	
Attack by wife against her husband's (suspected) mistress or second wife:	13 cases
Attack by husband against his wife or former wife:	6 cases
Attack by woman against her husband or step-father who had committed domestic violence against her:	4 cases
Attack by wife against her husband for other reasons (marital dispute over divorce or suspected infidelity):	2 cases
Attack by a divorced woman against a woman whom she suspected of having a relationship with her former husband:	1 cases
Attack by a divorced man against the new husband of his former wife:	1 cases
Uncertain but believed to be related to family or relationship problem:	5 cases
TOTAL MOTIVES RELATED TO FAMILY OR RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM:	32 cases
Other Motives: Argument, dispute, revenge, or robbery	6 cases
TOTAL OTHER MOTIVES:	6 cases
TOTAL UNKNOWN MOTIVES:	6 cases
TOTAL CASES:	44 cases

The most common type of attack was a wife throwing acid on a suspected mistress or second wife.

Attacks by husbands against their wives or former wives were the next most common. The husbands usually had a history of abusing their wives. Husbands threw acid as punishment for something the wife had done, or because of a separation or divorce. For example, one victim was a woman who tried to divorce her husband, who had beaten her and had raped a village girl. Her husband, who accused her of getting a new boyfriend, chased her with a gun and poured acid on her face. In another case, a man threw acid at this wife after she refused to give him 500 riels to buy cigarettes and tried to stop him from beating their son.

There was also one case of a divorced man who threw acid on his former wife's new husband.

⁶ These statistics refer to suspected or confirmed perpetrators. They refer to the main perpetrator or instigator of the attacks, and do not include accomplices of the perpetrator. The number of female perpetrators includes one case in which a man threw the acid but was believed to have been hired to do so by a woman.

MARRIAGE ENDS WITH ACID ATTACK

Chenda⁷ was aged 16 when her parents asked her to marry a man, a Ministry of Defense colonel, aged more than 50. The man agreed to build a house on her family's land, where he would live with Chenda and her parents. He said he would look after Chenda forever, and would also find treatment for her blind mother so that she could see again.

After they were married and Chenda gave birth to a boy, her husband began treating her and her parents badly. He cursed her and blamed Chenda, and sometimes refused to allow her to see or breast-feed their baby. He was very jealous of Chenda, and cursed her if he saw her talking to other people or if she was late coming home from the market. His bad behavior continued for several years and in 2000, after four years of marriage, he became more menacing. He threatened many times to "spoil" Chenda's appearance forever, and to hire someone to harm her. His threats were heard by Chenda's parents and by neighbors.

Worried for Chenda's safety, her parents locked the gate one day, preventing her husband from entering the house. He responded by filing a complaint to the court for a divorce and to divide ownership of the house between him and Chenda's family.

Several weeks later, two young men sprayed acid at Chenda as she was walking home with her younger sister. Chenda felt burning on her face and around her eyes, her clothes began to melt, and some of the acid also struck her sister's back and shoulder. They ran to a neighbor's house to wash off their burning skin and clothes, and went to hospital. Chenda spent three days in hospital and her burns took weeks to heal. But she was very lucky – the acid was battery acid, which is heavily diluted with water and not strong. She was not blinded, and her face was left with permanent pockmarks but not big scars or deformities. If the acid had been stronger, her injuries would have been far worse.

Ten days after the attack, while Chenda's face was still burned and sore, the provincial court ruled on her husband's divorce complaint and gave custody of their 3-year-old son to her husband. The court allowed her husband to move back into their house, with him occupying the upstairs and Chenda and her parents living downstairs. The husband moved back to the house, and the son went to live with him.

Chenda and parents made a complaint about the acid attack, but no-one was arrested. Chenda and her parents never saw the police come to question her husband, even though he had threatened to hire someone to harm her.

In late 2001, the Court of Appeal ordered that Chenda should receive custody of her son, and ownership of the whole house. Her husband appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, which has not yet ruled on the case. But the husband moved out of the house to go and live with a new wife, and took the son with him. Chenda has not seen her son since then, and doesn't know when she will.

Cases of women throwing acid on their husbands included one attack by a wife who suspected her husband had a mistress, and another one by a wife angry that her husband wanted to divorce her. In another case, a divorced woman attacked a woman whom she suspected of being her former husband's new girlfriend.

⁷ Not her real name, to protect her privacy.

There were four cases of victims of domestic violence throwing acid on the perpetrators of the violence: three wives who attacked their husbands who had often beaten them, and one young woman who attacked her step-father who had repeatedly beaten and tried to rape her.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LEADS TO ACID ATTACK

A 33-year-old former soldier used to beat his wife at their house in Kandal province. He had no regular job to make money to support his wife and young daughter, but drank alcohol and gambled a lot. When he was drunk, he would quarrel and abuse his family. He used to beat his wife with his hands and sticks, kick her, and smash property in the house. Villagers and the local authorities knew that this man always beat his wife and destroyed property when he was drunk. His wife decided to keep a liter of acid at home, to protect herself. One day in year 2000, her husband beat her seriously with his hands and a stick and a knife. Relatives of his wife and other villagers watched the abuse but no one dared to try to stop it. His wife ran to get the acid and threw it at her husband. His face was seriously burned, destroying one of his eyes and part of his nose. Some acid also splashed onto the clothes of relatives of the wife, including her mother and her niece. Police arrested the wife, who said she only wanted to warn her husband not to abuse her. The wife was sentenced to four years in prison, but the husband was never arrested for beating her.

In five other cases, the perpetrators or their exact motives were uncertain from newspaper reports but the attacks were apparently linked to jealousy or anger about relationships. For example, a young couple was attacked while riding on a moto after their engagement party. Another case was an attack on a young woman who had been involved with a married government official, and been wooed by many other men.

Six of the 44 acid attacks were motivated by other reasons, not connected to families or relationships. They included:

- A man who tried to throw acid at night at a neighbor, but hit the wrong person, because of a dispute over a bicycle;
- A Buddhist association president who sprayed acid at monks, slightly injuring one monk, during a dispute over property at a wat;
- Two cases in which the motive was believed to be attempted robbery of motorcycles of the victims. In both cases, the perpetrators escaped without stealing the motos because local people intervened when they heard the victims shouting out for help.

■ ***Victims' injuries***

At least three acid victims died, all at the time of the attack or within a few hours:

- A 33-year-old woman in Kompong Cham who was attacked by a divorced woman who thought her former husband was having a relationship with the victim.
- A 34-year-old man in Prey Veng whose wife poured a liter of acid over him because he beat her and her parents;
- A 35-year-old man in Kompong Cham who beat his wife on the head with a chain; when his wife returned from receiving treatment at hospital, she poured acid over his body.

Another 60 people were injured by acid. At least 39 of them suffered serious injuries to the face, body or limbs. Injuries to the face were most common. At least four people were blinded in one or both eyes, and another 11 suffered eye injuries but it was unclear from newspaper reports whether they were permanently blinded.

chapter four: **PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES FOR VICTIMS**

Acid burns are among the worst injuries that a human being can suffer. Victims' faces and bodies are tortured by the acid, leaving them with hideous scars and disabilities for the rest of their lives. Blindness or deafness may also occur, because the acid is usually thrown at the head.

Victims who survive their injuries have a long, painful and exhausting recovery. Deep burns are very difficult to heal and vulnerable to infection and other problems. Victims usually have to spend weeks or months in hospital, until their wounds begin to heal and the risk of infection is gone. Most will need multiple surgical operations and treatment lasting for years.

Medical expertise and equipment is poor in Cambodia, and severe acid damage can never be fully repaired. Acid victims will never look the same as they did before. Victims often have to pay for their medical treatment, and the quality of treatment they receive may depend on how much money they have. Some victims may not go to hospital at all, but try to treat their own wounds or go to local medical clinics or traditional healers.

■ *Injuries*

Acid burns through skin and flesh layer by layer, causing great pain and injury. It eats through the two layers of the skin, into the fat and muscle underneath, and sometimes down to the bone. It may dissolve the bone. The deepness of injury depends on the strength of the acid and the duration of contact with the skin – the burning continues until the acid is thoroughly washed off with water.

Thrown on a person's face, acid rapidly eats into eyes, ears, nose and mouth. The pain is excruciating, as an intense burning heat cuts through the victim's flesh like a hot knife. Eyelids and lips may burn off completely. The nose may melt, closing the nostrils, and ears shrivel up. Acid can quickly destroy the eyes, blinding the victim. Skin and bone on the skull, forehead, cheeks and chin may dissolve. As well as the face, the acid usually splashes or drips over the neck, chest, back, arms or legs, burning anywhere it touches.

The biggest immediate danger for victims is breathing failure. Inhalation of acid vapors can create breathing problems in two ways: by causing a poisonous reaction in the lungs or by swelling the neck, which constricts the airway and strangles the victim. One Cambodian acid victim died because the acid flowed into his nose and airway.

But victims usually do not die. The aim of most acid attacks is not to kill, but to maim and disfigure. The perpetrator wants the victim to live with a mutilated face, looking like a monster, and continue to suffer forever.

PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES OF ACID

As acid burns heal, they produce thick scars which pull the skin very tight and can cause severe disfigurements: eyelids no longer close, mouths no longer open; and the chin becomes welded to the chest. The following information on consequences of acid burns is from the NGO Medecins Du Monde and doctors at Calmette hospital in Phnom Penh.

Skull: May be partly destroyed or deformed. Hair is often lost.

Forehead: Skin may shrink, as though stretched tightly, and be scarred.

Ears: Shriveled up and deformed. Deafness may occur immediately or later. Cartilage in the ear is usually partly or totally destroyed, exposing the victim to future infection and hearing loss.

Eyes: Direct acid contact or acid vapors can damage eyes, causing blindness. Even if the eyes survive the acid attack, they remain vulnerable to other

threats which can cause blindness during the victim's recovery. Eyelids may have been burned off, or may be deformed by scarring, leaving the eyes to dry up and go blind. This is very difficult to prevent.

- Nose:** Shrunken and deformed. Nostrils may close completely because the cartilage is destroyed.
- Cheeks:** Scarred and deformed.
- Mouth:** Shrunken and narrowed, and may lose its shape. Lips may be partly or totally destroyed. Lips may be permanently flared, exposing the teeth. Movement of the lips, mouth and face may be impaired. Eating can be difficult.
- Chin:** Scarred and deformed. The scars may run downward, welding the chin to the neck or chest.
- Neck:** Often badly damaged. It may have a thick cord of scarred flesh running down from the chin to the upper chest, or a wide, heavily-scarred area on one side of the neck. Victim may be unable to extend the neck, or the head may constantly lean to one side.
- Chest:** Often badly scarred. The chest may have narrow lines of scars or wide patches of scars from acid splashes or drips. In girls and young women, the development of their breasts may be stopped, or their breasts may be destroyed completely.
- Shoulder:** May be badly scarred, especially around the underarm, which may limit the victim's arm movement. In some cases, one or both of the victim's upper arms may be stuck like glue to the sides of their body.

■ *Treatment*

The first treatment should be to flush the burned flesh with water for at least 60 minutes, to wash off the acid and stop the burning.

Emergency treatment at hospitals should include cleaning and bandaging the burns, and relieving any breathing problems caused by acid fumes. Doctors may have make incisions in the neck, or insert a tube down the throat, to allow the victim to breath.

Doctors carefully cut off pieces of infected or dead tissue around the burns, which may include flesh on the neck, back, chest, arms and even the face or the ears. Infection is a major danger for victims, because the dead tissue around deep burns is easily infected. Infection prevents the healing of the burns, spreads to healthy skin, and may kill the victim. Infection can attack the victim at any stage during the weeks and months it takes for acid burns to begin to heal. The wounds need to be constantly kept clean, and antibiotics given to fight infection. If infection develops, doctors may need to cut off more flesh.

Doctors do surgical operations to cover the burn wounds with very thin layers of undamaged skin taken from elsewhere on the patient's body, usually the thigh. Large, deep burns will not heal by themselves, so these skin grafts are done to close the wounds, prevent infection and help them to heal. The skin grafts are itchy and painful as they heal.

Burns are one of the most painful injuries which a human can suffer, and pain medicine is important. Some of the deepest acid burns may not be painful, because the nerves in the skin are destroyed, but the areas around them may be extremely painful. Each step of the treatment, from washing the wounds to undergoing surgical operations, may cause more pain.

Doctors must pay special attention to try to save the functioning of the eyes, nose and mouth, according to Medecins Du Monde doctors who have treated acid victims at Phnom Penh's Calmette Hospital. A device may be inserted between the lips to keep the mouth open and in proper shape, and small tubes inserted up the nostrils to prevent them from closing. The eyes are very vulnerable to infection and other problems which can cause blindness. Most important is to ensure that victims can close their eyes, preventing them from becoming dry and infected. Surgery may be needed to rebuild the eyelids, if they were destroyed by acid, or remove thick scars around the eyes as burns heal.

Eating enough food is vital because victims' bodies require a lot of energy to fight infection and heal the wounds. Burn victims require at least twice the calories that other people need. This may be difficult if the victim has burns around the mouth and difficulty swallowing, or doesn't have enough money to buy a lot of food. The victim can be trapped into a vicious cycle of malnutrition, infection and further damage to the skin.

It can take 3 to 12 months for burn wounds to heal. Thick scars, which are painful and itchy, grow over the healed burns. The scars grow and change over 1 to 2 years. As the scars thicken and contract, they can cause permanent disability by stiffening joints and restricting movement. Scarring on the neck and shoulders, for example, can prevent the patient from moving the head or arms properly. Doctors may need to perform many operations to release the scars and graft new skin over them. Scars may also grow over the nostrils or ear canals, and surgery is required to remove them.

Long periods of intensive physical therapy are needed to minimize victims' lack of movement from scarring, and special elastic bandages can dramatically reduce the thickness and stiffness of scars. However, such treatment is difficult to arrange in Cambodia. Some skin creams are also helpful to improve scars and reduce itching, but are expensive for many people.

The last stage of treatment is to try to restore the appearance of the victim's face and body as much as possible. At this stage, the wounds have healed completely and the full extent of scarring and deformities of the body can be seen. The victim may require many operations over two or three years. Pieces of heavily-scarred flesh may be removed or covered with more grafts of undamaged skin from elsewhere on the victim's body. Surgeons try to improve the shape of the lips, eyelids, cheeks and other parts of the face, although expertise to do this is very limited in Cambodia.

Even after their wounds are fully healed, victims may still suffer pain and discomfort. Victims often complain that their scars are itchy and sore, and some say they have breathing or other health problems. "When I have pain and my scars are itchy and I have trouble breathing, it is very difficult to bear," said one acid victim. "Nothing I can say can describe the pain and suffering, and nothing can help to take it away."

■ *Hospital services*

Medical services for acid victims are extremely limited. In Phnom Penh, most acid victims go to Kossamak Hospital, which has for many years treated burn victims and recently opened a special burns unit. The unit, which treats all types of burns, is the only specialist one in Cambodia. It has two beds for patients and a staff of three surgeons and three nurses. Calmette Hospital, Sihanouk Hospital and the Center of Hope hospital also sometimes receive acid victims in Phnom Penh. In the provinces, victims go to provincial hospitals, which are poorly equipped to deal with such injuries, or transferred to Phnom Penh if they can afford it or receive transport assistance.

Depending on the extent of their wounds, victims may stay in hospital for weeks or months. After they are released, they may return to hospitals or some medical NGOs for further operations. Some victims receive follow-up surgery from the Rose Center at Kien Khleang, or from NGOs such as Medecins Du Monde which sometimes send foreign surgeons on missions to Cambodia.

Victims often have to pay for medical treatment at government hospitals, although some hospitals may agree not to charge poor people. How long a victim can stay in hospital, and the quality of treatment they receive, may depend on how much money they have. Doctors at

government hospitals in Phnom Penh say they advise victims' families, if they have money, to buy better medicines outside of the hospitals. Victims who can afford it may go to private medical clinics or travel to Vietnam or other countries for treatment.

The medical costs do not end when the victim leaves hospital. The victim may still need bandages, antibiotics and other medicine while recovering at home. There are also transport costs, especially for victims from the provinces, to go to Phnom Penh for follow-up surgery. The victim, who usually cannot work, also has to find money for food and other living expenses. Poor victims and their families may be forced to sell motorcycles, land or other property to pay for all these costs, forcing them into deeper poverty.

Some victims may not even go to hospital immediately after an acid attack, but try to treat themselves or go to local medics or traditional healers. According to Calmette Hospital doctors, at least 16 acid victims who were later treated there said they did not immediately seek treatment from hospitals after they were burned. The victims waited at least a month, and sometimes more than 6 months, before going to Calmette. Victims who do not receive proper emergency treatment after an acid attack often suffer more severe health problems, scars and deformities.

MOTHER KILLED & SONS INJURED

One night in December 1999, two young boys were asleep with their mother at home in Prey Chhor district in Kompong Cham. Three people arrived outside the house and called for the boys' mother to open the door. Lighting a lamp and opening the door, the mother was hit in the face by acid. A lot of acid also splashed over the victim's 12-year-old son, who had woken and sat up when his mother went to open the door. The other son, aged 10, who was still lying down, was hit by a smaller amount of acid.

The perpetrators ran off as the mother screamed. Her brother, who lived nearby, arrived to help his sister. She was badly injured on her face and chest, and her hair was burned off. Her body began to convulse, she rolled around in pain, and her urine and stools flowed uncontrollably from her body. She died at home, in front of her relatives, after more than two hours of suffering.

Her 12-year-old son was badly burned on his face, chest, arms and back, and his younger brother burned on the side of his head. Both were taken to the district hospital and then to the provincial hospital, but the hospitals would not admit them because the 12-year-old was too badly injured. The boys were sent to hospital in Phnom Penh.

The attack was committed by a woman named Vong Nearn, aged 43, and two accomplices. Vong Nearn had been divorced from her husband about six months earlier. Three months before the attack, Nearn saw her former husband working in a ricefield with the victim, and suspected the two had a relationship. "If someone takes my husband, their intestines will fly in the air," an angry Nearn warned.

Nearn was convicted for the attack and sentenced to 18 years in prison. One accomplice, a man named Soeun Puth, was sentenced to 3 years in prison. The other accomplice, his brother named Soeun Seard, escaped but was sentenced in absentia to 14 years imprisonment.

The victims' two children have had to recover from their injuries and face the rest of their childhood without their mother. The youngest son now lives with other relatives in Kampong Cham. The eldest son, who was most seriously injured, lives in an NGO center in Phnom Penh. His face and body is still badly disfigured. He has received surgery to try to reduce the acid scars and will require more operations in the future. His health is erratic, and he complains of fever, colds, coughing, and itchy scars.

chapter five: **OTHER CONSEQUENCES FOR VICTIMS**

Imagine for a minute that your face was horribly scarred. How would you feel? How would people behave toward you? Acid attacks change the lives of victims forever, as they are constantly tortured by huge psychological, social and economic consequences.

■ *Psychological consequences*

Acid attacks do not only destroy skin and bone, but also seriously damage the way victims feel and think. These psychological problems are caused by the terror victims suffer during the attack, as they feel their skin burning away, and the terrible disfigurement they have to live with afterward.

Victims suffer many psychological symptoms, such as:

- **Depression:** Feeling sad and hopeless; thinking they can never have a normal life again; wanting to die.
- **Thinking and worrying a lot.**
- **Sleeping problems:** Insomnia or nightmares.
- **Fearful:** Afraid that the perpetrator will harm them again; afraid to go outside and see other people.
- **Headaches, weakness and tiredness, difficulty to concentrate or remember things.**

Doctors and nurses at Kompong Cham provincial hospital say acid victims usually insist they do not want to live any longer. They are depressed, ashamed, worried, and cannot concentrate. They fear that no one will care or pay attention to them in the future, and feel very lonely.

An acid victim taken to Kossamak hospital in Phnom Penh begged her family to ask doctors to give her a lethal injection to kill her, according to her grandmother. The victim has now been discharged from hospital but she is still very sad, ashamed, fearful for her future, and cries a lot, the grandmother said.

Victims suffer severe psychological symptoms for years, if not forever, because they are reminded every day of their physical scars. They may not be able to bear to look at themselves in a mirror, or have other people look at them. They may feel hopeless, worthless and believe they have nothing to live for. "I look like a ghost, so I hate myself," said one Cambodian acid survivor. "I have the soul of a dead woman now," said another one. "My body is alive but my soul is dead."

■ *Social & economic consequences*

Victims also face a lifetime of discrimination from other people. They become lonely and ashamed because people may stare or laugh at them, blame them for their bad fate, or just avoid them completely. Friends and even family members may abandon them. Victims may not want to go outside of their homes. Even simple tasks such as going to market can be very embarrassing and frightening for them. Victims who are single are unlikely to ever get married.

Discrimination from other people, or disability such as blindness, makes it very difficult for victims to find jobs and make money. For example, one victim who tried to start a roadside food stall had to give up because "people are too frightened and disgusted by my condition to do business with me". Many victims depend on their families for food and money, which makes the family poorer and leads to stress and family conflicts. It is not only the victims, but also their families, who suffer in many ways from acid attacks.

However, despite the many hardships that they suffer, it is important to remember that acid survivors can rebuild their lives. It is easy - but wrong - for other people to think that acid victims can have no future. With support, encouragement and opportunities to learn new skills, they can be helped to help themselves, to find jobs and live well. An example is the story of Boun Mao below.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

In 1993, after he was blinded by acid thrown in his face by a robber, Boun Mao wanted to die because he thought he had nothing to live for. Ten years later, he can use a computer, has earned a university degree, and is the director of an association which helps blind people.

Boun Mao, aged 33, is living proof that acid survivors are not helpless and hopeless. Although they must confront many obstacles, they can achieve as much as any other person.

Mao was a young university student in 1993 when a robber threw acid at him and stole his moto in Phnom Penh. Mao was taken to an UNTAC hospital and treated by German doctors, who told him he would never be able to see again. He asked the doctors to kill him and, when they wouldn't, he thought about committing suicide. "I thought I had no life, no way to support myself because I am an orphan. How could I live?"

But Mao decided to fight to survive, and slowly he managed to rebuild his life. He had to learn how to take care of himself as a blind person, to cook and clean and do everything else like other people. He studied for three years at a rehabilitation center for the blind at Wat Sarawan, run by the Maryknoll NGO. He learned English, Braille (in Khmer and English), typing, and other skills. Finally, he trained in massage techniques, so that he could have the chance to earn money in the future.

As well as learning to have the confidence and determination to get new skills, he had to overcome discrimination from other people who thought a blind man like him could do nothing.

"When I started, people laughed at me and said 'Why do you study?'. I was upset, but I tried very hard to change their attitude. Slowly, slowly, their attitude changed."

In 1997, Mao and other blind trainees established a massage center called 'Seeing Hands' in Phnom Penh, to provide massages to foreign and Khmer customers. Their business grew and the blind staff were able to earn money to support themselves, without having to depend on others.

Today, 'Seeing Hands' has 7 offices and employs 40 blind masseurs, who earn \$50-200 a month, and 13 other people.

In 1999, Mao went to Thailand to study computer skills (using a computer with a voice synthesizer, for blind people) and leadership. After he returned to Cambodia, Mao became the first blind student to study at the University of Phnom Penh, and was recently awarded a bachelor's degree in English language.

Mao wants to help other people, not just himself. In 2000 he helped to establish the Association of the Blind in Cambodia, an organization for blind people to help blind people, and was appointed its director.

Mao believes it's important for acid survivors and blind people to struggle to learn new skills, to be able to look after themselves, earn money and not have to rely on others.

"There is discrimination against us, but it also depends on ourselves, to be strong or not. If we are strong to show that we have ability to do things, then when they see our activities, they see that we are independent by ourselves, how can they discriminate against us?"

They cannot discriminate any more, because we are the same as sighted people. We earn our money by our hard work, by our energy, not like a beggar or a thief.”

Mao encourages victims to fight to improve their lives, but he also urges government, police and court officials to fulfill their responsibilities to prevent and punish acid attacks.

“Firstly, I would like them to think about the acid, and the people who use acid for their businesses. If they want to buy acid for business purposes, they should have to have authorization to buy it. Secondly, if you use acid to threaten other people, you need to face the law very strictly. That means you must be taken to court.”

Even though he is blind and his face is still badly scarred – he has had 7 operations to reconstruct his face, including his nose and mouth which were destroyed by acid – Mao knows he has much reason to live.

Remembering the time after the acid attack when he wanted to die, Mao smiles and says: “Now, I’m very happy to live. I am very happy I can help other people to get jobs. Now, I not only smile myself, but I let other people smile too, in a hopeful way.”

chapter six: **THE LAW**

■ *How can perpetrators be punished?*

Cambodian criminal law does not mention acid violence. But perpetrators can be charged with battery with injury, which carries a sentence of up to 10 years imprisonment. If the victims dies or receives life-threatening injuries, more serious charges such as murder, attempted murder or manslaughter should be laid. They carry sentences of 10 years to life imprisonment.

■ *Is the law enforced?*

The police generally take action to investigate acid attacks, according to newspaper reports. The police arrested people for at least 13 of the 44 attacks reported in newspapers in the past three years. In some other cases, the police identified suspected perpetrators but it was unclear whether arrests were made.

A common problem is that perpetrators try to persuade victims or their families to withdraw their complaints to the courts, by offering them money or promising to pay for their medical costs. Victims who are poor and have expensive medical bills, and know they may not be able to work in the future to make money, may feel they have no choice but to agree. Unfortunately, some police and court officials may accept this, even though it violates their duties under the law.

It is unclear how many attacks lead to prosecutions and convictions by the courts. LICADHO is aware of convictions in only six cases, but there may have been other convictions. In a few cases, prosecutions are currently in progress but yet to go to trial.

The six attacks that led to convictions, and the perpetrators’ sentences, are:

- A woman who threw acid on her drunk and abusive husband, blinding him in one eye, during one of his many beatings of her: **4 years** imprisonment.
- A woman who threw acid on her husband, blinding him in both eyes, because he was divorcing her: **15 years** imprisonment;
- A man who threw acid on his wife because she left him to go and live with another man: **9 months** imprisonment;

- A woman who threw acid on her husband's second wife, seriously injuring her: **6 years** imprisonment for attempted murder.
- A woman who killed a woman and injured her two sons with acid because she suspected the victim of having a relationship with her former husband: **18 years** imprisonment (two accomplices were also convicted and sentenced, although one escaped);
- A woman who threw acid on her husband's second wife, seriously mutilating her, and kidnapped the victim's baby: a **2 years suspended** sentence (so the perpetrator spent no time in prison).

These cases illustrate that court sentences for acid violence may vary greatly. For example, three cases which went to trial in Kompong Cham provincial court produced the following sentences: 9 months imprisonment; 18 years imprisonment; and two years imprisonment, suspended.

Two convictions show a huge inconsistency in sentencing by the courts, probably because of discrimination against women: a woman who threw acid on her husband was jailed for 15 years, but a man who threw acid on his wife got only 9 months imprisonment.

While some acid throwers have been convicted and sent to prison, others – especially those with power or money – live freely. An example is the woman who threw acid at her husband's second wife and kidnapped the victim's baby. The victim was permanently scarred and her baby was never returned to her. The perpetrator, named Minh Rinath, who is married to an army colonel, was convicted but received only a suspended sentence. The decision was made by the chief judge of Kampong Cham provincial court.

Another example is the 1999 attack on karaoke singer Tat Marina. The Phnom Penh municipal court issued an arrest warrant for attempted murder for the alleged perpetrator, who is the wife of a senior government official, but she was never arrested.

If powerful people are involved in acid attacks, it sends a dangerous message to Cambodian society that acid throwing is acceptable behavior. This message is reinforced if the perpetrators are not arrested and punished properly.

“DO THEY UNDERSTAND THE VICTIM'S PAIN?”

Bophal⁸ does not understand why the perpetrator who threw acid over her, damaging her face and body forever, has never spent even one day in prison. Nothing can compensate Bophal for her suffering, but she at least wants the authorities to try to understand it.

“Do the court officials and the authorities have compassion? Do they understand the victim's pain?,” asks Bophal, crying as she tries to explain her suffering. “It is impossible to describe it with words. Nothing can compare to the suffering that acid victims endure.”

Several years after the acid attack, Bophal's perpetrator, a rich woman, still lives freely and can do whatever she wants. Bophal, a poor woman, lives in a cage of suffering, misery and fear. She knows she can never forget or remove the horrible scars on her face and body, which still often feel hot, itchy and painful. Bophal is afraid to go outside much, because the perpetrator's relatives have threatened her and her family to try to get them to drop their court complaint. She feels no protection from the courts, which have so far failed to put the perpetrator in prison.

Bophal hopes that the law will be strengthened and that perpetrators of acid attacks will be properly punished, so that the pain and suffering of victims is recognized.

“I would like to appeal to court officials, government officials and other authorities to pay attention and to punish the perpetrators, no matter if they are poor or rich, weak or strong, simple people or powerful people,” she says.

⁸ Not her real name, to protect her privacy.

■ *Important law initiative*

A new draft law on domestic violence includes a provision to punish acid throwers by 5-10 years in prison. This would be the first time that Cambodian law specifically refers to acid attacks, and should help to bring acid throwers to justice and encourage consistency in court sentences for perpetrators. The draft law has to be approved by the National Assembly and Senate before it takes effect.

In order to make it stronger, some changes should be made to the wording of this provision in the draft law before the National Assembly and Senate approve it. The current draft provision would only apply to family members who throw acid on other members of their family. This would exclude people who throw acid at victims who are not related to them, such as wives who attack their husband's mistresses. The wording should be changed so that it applies to anyone who throws acid for any reason connected to domestic, family or personal relationship issues, regardless of whether the perpetrator and the victim are in the same family. Also, the maximum penalty for acid throwing should be increased, especially if permanent disability such as blindness occurs.

The draft provision in the domestic violence law is a valuable initiative against acid attacks which should be supported and strengthened to make it as effective as possible. In addition to the draft domestic violence law, the proposed new penal code should also contain similar strong punishments for people who throw acid for other reasons, such as robbery.

chapter seven: **EXPERIENCE IN BANGLADESH**

Acid throwing occurs in other Asian countries including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Nepal, Vietnam and Laos. Some cases have also been reported in Africa, Europe and the United States.

One of the countries with the biggest problems is Bangladesh, where acid violence has increased alarmingly in recent years. At least 47 acid attacks were reported there in 1996, 130 in 1997 and more than 200 in 1998. At least 250 attacks a year occurred since then, meaning a total of 750 attacks between 1999-2001.

In the beginning, acid attacks were nearly always directed only at young women and girls, committed by men who were jealous or angry that the victims had rejected their sexual advances or marriage proposals. As acid violence grew more common, however, men and older women also became targets, and the motives for attacks grew more varied. Now, more than 30% of victims are men, and land disputes are one of the biggest reasons for attacks.

The escalating problem has been blamed on various factors, including lack of punishment for acid throwers. Because many perpetrators are not arrested, other people believe they can commit the crime and will get away with it. Of the 750 reported acid attacks between 1999 and 2001, only about 25 perpetrators were convicted. The Bangladesh police and the courts are corrupt, poorly trained and inefficient. Many perpetrators are rich and powerful, so they bribe the authorities not to take action or threaten or pay the victims to withdraw their complaints. Many victims are poor, do not know about the law and cannot afford to wait a long time while the police and courts investigate the case. The problem has now grown so serious that the government has established a special court to prosecute acid throwers.

Others reasons for acid violence include Bangladesh's male-dominated society, where discrimination and violence against women is common. Many Bangladeshi men view women as property and not equal to men, and some react violently if a woman refuses to have sex or to marry them. However, as acid throwing became more common, men as well as women have become victims.

A contributing problem is that acid can be bought easily and very cheaply in Bangladesh, so the government is now planning a new law to strictly control acid sales.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The time to act against acid attacks is now. Acid attacks are very destructive for Cambodian society and culture, and set a bad example for young Khmers. If acid throwing becomes more common in Cambodia, more and more people will think that it is an acceptable way to resolve their problems. Khmer lives will continue to be destroyed by acid.

Initiatives that could be taken immediately to prevent and punish acid attacks and to help victims:

LAW TO PUNISH PERPETRATORS:

The National Assembly and the Senate should strengthen and approve the provisions against acid attacks contained in the draft law on domestic violence. The law should apply to all acid attacks committed because of domestic, family or personal relationship issues. The maximum penalties for perpetrators should be increased for cases of permanent disability such as blindness. The draft new penal code should also include strong sentences for acid attacks committed for other reasons, such as robbery. The police, courts and the public should be educated on the laws.

PUBLIC EDUCATION:

The public should be educated, especially through popular media such as television and radio, about the cruelty and immorality of acid throwers. Education should emphasize that perpetrators can and should be sent to prison. Education should also promote compassion – not blame – for victims.

ASSIST VICTIMS TO SPEAK OUT:

Acid victims are isolated and ignored in society. It is important that the voices of victims can be heard, or little will be done to assist them and prevent acid attacks. Victims should be assisted to form groups to speak on their own behalf to the government, the courts, and the public.

CONDEMNATION OF ACID ATTACKS:

Senior government officials, police and court officials, medical doctors, monks, NGO leaders and others should publicly condemn acid attacks and call for strong punishment of perpetrators.

MEDICAL & OTHER SERVICES FOR VICTIMS:

Acid victims need very special help to rebuild their lives. The government and NGOs should strongly support the burns unit at Kossamak Hospital in Phnom Penh. Similar units should be established in the provinces. Victims should be able to receive counselling and psychological services, and receive assistance to set up self-help groups to support to each other.

CONTROLS ON ACID SALES:

The sale of strong, undiluted acid should be strictly regulated by law. Sellers should be required to record the names and addresses of all buyers. When acid attacks occur, part of the police investigation should be to determine where the perpetrator obtained the acid. Sellers should be prosecuted if they have violated the law.



FIGHTING AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

"When I started to study, people laughed at me and said 'Why do you study?' I was upset, but I tried very hard to change their attitude. Slowly, slowly, their attitude changed."

— Boun Mao, director of the Association of the Blind in Cambodia, pictured at his computer in his office in Phnom Penh. Since being blinded in an acid attack 10 years ago, Mao has trained as a massage therapist, become the first blind Cambodian to get a university degree, and studied computer skills and English language. Through his Association, Mao helps other blind people to fight discrimination, learn new skills and rebuild their lives. Mao is an example of how acid survivors can, with encouragement, support and opportunities for training, escape from living in the shadows.