

From mines to COVID: Cambodia dogs train to sniff out virus

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Cambodian anti-landmine authorities are training dogs to sniff out COVID-19, hoping the sharp-nosed canines normally used to detect underground explosives can keep the virus on a tight leash.

Cambodia has won praise for a swift vaccine drive, with the [health ministry](#) saying over 98 percent of the [adult population](#) has received at

least one dose.

Now they are embarking on a new strategy to spot COVID cases.

Joining the fight will be 12 Belgian Malinois dogs the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) has trained to nose out unsuspecting patients who might be carrying the virus.

In the longer term, the centre hopes to use the dogs at major events, including sports matches, director general Heng Ratana told AFP.

"Dogs are more efficient than other tools," he said.

The University of Health Sciences provided samples of volatile organic compounds—organic chemicals that emit odours—from COVID-19 patients to the demining agency's facility in Kampong Chhnang province.

The dogs, bred in Cambodia, have so far proven to be very good boys.

"After two and a half months, our dogs are in an early stage of success (so) they could sniff out the scent of COVID-19," dog trainer Khom Sokly told AFP.

Four are now able to detect COVID-19 placed in a one-metre tube in less than a minute, he said, while the other eight are training to root out the scents in an [open space](#) "at any location".

"In the future, I hope the dogs could take part in preventing or reducing COVID-19 because they are fast," Khom Sokly said.

CMAC staff said the budding virus-hunters have a few months left in their training regime.

Nearly three decades of civil war and US bombing starting in the 1960s left Cambodia one of the most heavily bombed and mined countries in the world.

The kingdom has vowed to clear all mines and unexploded ordnance by 2025, with several organisations working with veteran deminers, [sniffer dogs](#) and even rats to reach the goal.

Other countries deploying [dogs](#) in the fight against COVID include Ecuador and Italy, where there is a programme in a Rome hospital for training canines to detect the virus in human sweat.

Cambodia largely avoided a mass outbreak during the pandemic last year, but cases surged from the 20,000 mark in May to a total of 110,000 cases in late September and more than 2,200 deaths.

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