



Mosa, the first elephant fitted with an artificial leg, is trying to walk. The elephant lost her leg in a landmine explosion. (Photo by SOMSAK SILA SA)

FINDING HER FEET

Two years ago a landmine along the Thai-Burmese border in Tak province blew up the right forefoot of the seven-month-old cow elephant Mosa.

Last week, Mosa, now two years and seven months old, found her feet again thanks to a prosthetic leg.

After four months of hard work, the 15-member medical team from the Prostheses Foundation of Thailand is enjoying watching Mosa slowly regain her mobility.

The team even painted the prosthetic leg black so it blends in with the other legs.

Young Mosa stepped on a landmine in June 2006. The blast severed her right forefoot. She was put into the care of the Elephant Hospital at the Thai Elephant Conservation Centre in Lampang's Hang Chat district.

Veterinarians at the Elephant Hospital spent over six months tending to the wound. The team's primary concern, however, was Mosa's loss of balance after amputation of the stricken leg.

The bones in her left front leg began to deform because of the increased weight bearing down on the leg. Her back was also stooping.

The team decided to fit Mosa with a prosthetic leg to restore body balance and prevent deformity of other limbs.

Four months working on that, and the prosthesis was unveiled on June 21.

Dr Therdchai Cheevaket, chief doctor of the Prostheses Foundation, was one of those behind the project.

He has been developing prosthetic devices for handicapped people for over 60 years.

"This is an important day for all those who have been working on prosthetic legs.



ABOVE The Elephant Hospital in Hang Chat district of Lampang has become a treatment centre for wounded and sick elephants.

INSET Dr Therdchai Cheevaket, chief doctor of the Prostheses Foundation, is behind the success in producing artificial legs for elephants maimed by landmines.

"It's the first time that we have successfully designed and developed a prosthetic leg for an elephant," he said.

Dr Therdchai said Mosa's plastic prosthetic leg is a Thai innovation involving new moulding techniques.

The success in fitting a prosthetic leg for Mosa has given hope for organisations caring for elephants maimed by landmines in border

areas, especially in Burma's Karen state and in Tak province.

Many elephants have been maimed or killed by landmines while hauling logs.

Among the injured elephants is 47-year-old Motala who drew an outpouring of public sympathy after her left front foot was blown off nine years ago in Karen state. She is the next cow elephant that Dr Therdchai's team is plan-

ning to make a prosthetic leg for.

Motala's left forefoot was amputated after she stepped on the landmine.

However, due to her age and weight, her leg wound did not heal completely. The tissue around her stump still requires regular treatment.

Motala is not ready for a prosthetic leg yet. But Soraida Salwala, founder of the Friends of the Asian Elephant foundation which runs the Elephant Hospital, said she hoped Motala would be the next to get a prosthetic leg after Mosa.

Now, Motala is wearing a shoe-like cast which the veterinarians at the Ele-

phant Hospital created for her three years ago.

It was Motala's ordeal in 1999 that drew media attention worldwide to elephants injured by landmines in border areas of Thailand, and donations towards Motala's treatment flooded in to the Elephant Hospital.

Ms Soraida said the cost of treating Motala comes to 60,000 baht a month excluding medical supplies. Motala is luckier than other elephants treated at the hospital because she has a savings account of over four million baht of public donations behind her.

Ms Soraida said the foundation has bought government bonds with the fund, to ensure the elephant continues to have money for treatment when she needs it.



Thai doctors fit plastic prosthesis to elephant's foot, after she lost it in landmine blast, in medical advance which holds out hope for other pachyderms — including Motala the elephant, injured in Karen state blast nine years ago, writes **Somsak Suksai**

Jungle landmines taking a heavy toll

More than 100 elephants hauling logs on the Thai-Burmese border are in constant danger, as one step in the wrong direction could injure or even kill them.

The danger is buried underground. Countless landmines are death traps for elephants caught in the wild and trained to carry out the toughest of tasks — bringing logs out of the deep jungles on the Burmese side of the border. The landmines were laid because of the long-standing military clashes between minority rebels and the Burmese army.

But the casualties are not restricted to humans.

In the past 10 years, many elephants have been injured by landmines buried along the Thai-Burmese border in Tak's Mae Sot district.

The lure of high pay for hauling logs has exposed

the elephants to this life-threatening danger. Each mahout receives 30,000-40,000 baht per elephant per month for hauling the logs. But they must find food for the elephants themselves.

"Over the past five years, more and more elephants have been wounded by landmines," said veterinarian Preecha Puangkham, director of the medical section at the Elephant Hospital in Lampang's Hang Chat district.

One of the hospital's patients, a female named Motala, captured the hearts of the nation after its struggle for life after treading on a mine in 1999. Its leg was mutilated and a prosthetic leg was made for it.

Since the hospital was opened in 1993, it has provided treatment to 2,825 elephants, said Dr Preecha.

At present, 447 elephants have been admitted to

the in-patient wards and 20 need special treatment. The out-patients number almost 400.

The hospital said most elephants were treated for wounds sustained while hauling logs. A source said medical check-ups also revealed traces of narcotics in some elephants. Some mahouts admitted they mixed methamphetamines with bananas, which they gave to the elephants so they would work longer hours.

Dr Preecha said some elephants "decommissioned" from the job of log-hauling were taken to resorts to entertain tourists.

Soraida Salwala, founder of the Friends of the Asian Elephant foundation, said the elephant population has dwindled and there are believed to be only 3,000, including in the wild, left in the country. — **Somsak Suksai**

Vets measure the artificial leg being made for Motala, a female elephant. She drew public sympathy after she was maimed by a landmine in the jungle of neighbouring Burma in 1999. Public donations of over four million baht are kept in a bank to look after her. **SOMSAK SUKSAI**

