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The Bridge from Hold to Build

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Recruiting and training a local workforce is vital to community-based demining.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALEX HENEGAR

The Bridge from Hold to Build

In Afghanistan, the United States and United Nations are developing a new approach to community-based demining by funding local nongovernmental organizations. The use of these Afghan NGOs has not only allowed clearance to begin more quickly and continue more effectively, but has also helped the local population along the path to recovery and supported overall counterinsurgency efforts.

by Colonel Yori Escalante [United States Marine Corps]

Now Zad, located in the district of Helmand province that bears the same name, was once the second largest city of the province with a population of more than 30,000. Although somewhat isolated in the northern part of Helmand, it had everything that an Afghan needed to flourish, including fertile farmland and bustling bazaars. However, in early 2006 the Taliban took control and drove away the entire population of Now Zad. Many of the residents moved as far away as Lashkar Gah, an arduous 125-kilometer (48-mile) journey on rough roads through Taliban-infested areas, and wondered if they would ever return to their homes. After taking over Now Zad, the militants filled the homes, shops, schools and streets with mines and improvised explosive devices, much as they had done in many other areas.

The second major offensive in Helmand province for Task Force Leatherneck (the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade), Operation Cobra's Anger in December 2009, was to remove the Taliban from Now Zad. Once cleared, Now Zad was a prime candidate for immediate assistance and the type of international development critical to the United States' counterinsurgency strategy of "Clear-Hold-Build." This strategy involves clearing a target area of insurgents (Clear), providing security and infrastructure to locals while screening the population for insurgents (Hold), and establishing or re-establishing essential services using both NGO and local workforces (Build). The only problem was

that the explosive remnants of the battle for Now Zad and the large number of mines and IEDs left by the Taliban still littered the area.

The Strategy

The Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) manages and executes the work required to create the "bridge" from hold to build within the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy. Known as Conventional Weapons Destruction, the effort addresses humanitarian mine action, battle-area clearance and small-arms and light-weapons destruction. CWD has enabled the United States to be the international leader in this important aspect of humanitarian assistance and development. Since 1993, the United States has provided more than US\$1.8 billion to more than 80 countries to conduct demining and unexploded-ordnance clearance, and since 2001 has destroyed more than 1.4 million weapons and 80,000 tons of otherwise at-risk, unstable or unsecure weapons and ammunition that could find their way into the militants' hands.¹ In Afghanistan alone, the United States has funded projects totaling nearly \$200 million. PM/WRA provides funds to U.S. contractors and international nongovernmental organizations to conduct clearance and destruction operations, develop survivor and educational services, and establish capacity for the host nation to eventually take ownership of the effort.

Community-Based Demining

A concept now being used by the United States and the United Nations in Afghanistan is one of community-based demining. Often, when contractors and international NGOs establish demining and clearance operations in an area, the workforce is recruited from the local area, trained and employed to execute the project, and later dispatched to other areas needing clearance. Thus, in a way, all demining and clearance operations can be called community-based. However, CBD in Afghanistan is different in many ways because the approach uses Afghan NGOs that have worked in Afghanistan for 20 years or more. The Afghan NGOs have built a relationship with the population and are able to recruit individuals who will remain after the project is complete. The NGOs can also enter an area very soon after combat operations have ceased. Often, international NGOs will not be welcomed or cannot gain access to those areas due to the security situation. This aspect is important since in the past, demining and clearance operations have only been attempted after conflicts have ended. In the conflict in

Afghanistan, quick action is vital to rebuilding trust and confidence with the local residents. The United States currently funds five Afghan NGOs—Afghan Technical Consultants, Demining Agency for Afghanistan, Mine Clearance Planning Agency, Mine Detection Center, and Organization for Mine Clearance and Afghanistan Rehabilitation—that are uniquely positioned to implement these community-based projects quickly and effectively.

CBD differs from other demining and clearance efforts; organizations work closely with the local leadership in a specific village, district or province. The local leaders identify projects and assist in informing the residents of the impact of CBD and the need for a local workforce. This workforce, many times consisting of young men who would otherwise be recruited by the Taliban for insurgent operations, is then trained in the skill of demining. Often the men are put through vocational training during their off-duty hours to ensure they have a relevant trade once the project is complete. This in turn builds confidence and a sense of ownership in the overall project, as well as a sense of pride that the lo-

cal populations are involved in the improvement of their village or district. Such examples of CBD reinforce local governance and reduce the influence of insurgents.

Successes of CBD in Now Zad

PM/WRA regularly makes an effort to coordinate closely with U.S. or Coalition Forces in an area, and Task Force Leatherneck was no exception. The U.S. Marines quickly understood the importance of demining and clearance operations and the benefits that CBD could provide. Soon after the completion of the operation, Brigadier General Lawrence Nicholson, the Commander of Task Force Leatherneck, along with members of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Helmand Provincial Governor Mangal and leaders from Now Zad, as well as representatives of the five Afghan demining NGOs funded by PM/WRA, conducted a demining *shura*. *Shura*, the Arabic word for consultation, is the way most Islamic tribal leaders meet to resolve problems and issues. The purpose of this *shura* was to highlight the need to implement a CBD project in Now Zad, one that would address the most urgent clearance needs of

the village and enable further development projects to begin. Brigadier General Nicholson stressed that residents and local leadership needed to step up and take control of Now Zad or risk the town being returned to the Taliban. As a result of the *shura*, close coordination and planning commenced between the Marines, PM/WRA, U.S. Embassy, United Nations Mine Action Coordination Center for Afghanistan, local leadership and the NGOs.



U.S. and local leadership must be involved to ensure the “bridge” from hold to build is successful.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Vital to the NGOs and the leaders of Now Zad were assurances of security from Task Force Leatherneck—security that was not visible, but effective. What eventually materialized was a collaborative effort for a \$1.8 million project with three of the five NGOs (Mine Clearance Planning Agency, the Demining Agency for Afghanistan and the Mine Detection Center) where the strengths of each organization were leveraged. The project began in March 2010 and is scheduled to be completed within 12 months, employing more than 120 local staff, benefitting more than 1,350 families and clearing 594,000 square kilometers (229,345 square miles) of land covering the four most affect-

ed communities in and around Now Zad: Ali Zai, Barakzi, Deh Meyan and Sarkani.

Over and above the initial benefits, the project includes the establishment of a clinic, primarily for the medical care of the deminers, but also to serve as a source of health support for the citizens of Now Zad. As the word spread that deminers were starting their work, many of the displaced members of Now Zad started to return, some for the first time in four years.

CBD has been conducted in Afghanistan for several years, with projects funded and executed in Kunar, Nangahar and Kandahar provinces. The projects’ workforce was recruited from the local area and included vocational training. Unlike the projects that began several years after fighting had ceased in the Kunar, Nangahar and Kandahar provinces, however, the project in Now Zad commenced within weeks of combat concluding, giving development agencies the opportunity to provide relief to the Now Zad area sooner than expected. The project in Now Zad is seen as a model for future uses of CBD, especially since it uses Afghan NGOs and beginning work early with local authorities means clearance operations can allow relief and development to arrive quickly. This further builds the population’s confidence in the NATO International Security Assistance Force’s work, and more importantly, in the local Afghan government.

Conclusion

Confidence is key to successful counterinsurgency operations. The local population must have confidence in the forces in its area and in

the agencies and organizations providing relief and development. The Marine Corps’ approach to counterinsurgency stresses building this confidence through close coordination and partnering with local forces, government officials and the citizens of the areas for which they are responsible. In order to provide relief and development quickly, the time between hold and build must be as short as possible. Many times, due to combat operations recently concluding, this time is delayed in order to clear the area of explosive remnants of war. This delay could potentially result in a loss of confidence by the local communities in the forces operating in their area. CBD is yet another way for the United States to insure that the “bridge” from hold to build is as short as possible. ♦

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