The Mine Action Express... or the Wreck of the ‘09

Dennis Barlow

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol10/iss2/2
by Dennis Barlow [ Mine Action Information Center ]

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The author discusses current challenges relating to an effective global mine-action strategy; he considers approaches and policies that could enhance or impede demining efforts worldwide. There are many emerging concepts to consider in order to improve mine action, such as mainstreaming, risk management and national ownership. The author discusses potential future plans of action the community must undertake regarding these issues in order to deal effectively with landmines and explosive remnants of war.

I n the 20th century, railroad lines became famous for highly efficient, progressive and dependable travel—or for dramatic accidents which epitomized the heights of negligence and bad planning. Whether these railroad events are agonizing or amusing, the images and emotions they evoke—similar to mine-action accidents or accomplishments—are vividly etched into our minds.

At the Mine Action Information Center, it seems to us that the rapidly developing state of mine action has reached the point where it, like great and majestic train lines, combine the best of many technologies and innovations to provide effective and secure service—or it can force together conflicting strategies and mechanisms to cause its own “great train wreck.”

Over the past year, some of the best practitioners, policymakers and pundits involved in mine action have developed some thought-provoking and timely concepts that should be considered for integration into mine-action campaigns. I will discuss a few of these ideas here, not only with a view to their validity as specific ideas, but also with an eye to integrating them into a total system that will yield the greatest overall efficiencies.

Effective national ownership implies a string of interrelated conditions. It suggests a strong national will; an integrated set of government agencies; the ability to recognize, build and maintain capacities; and a skill and willingness to engage the populace. Those characteristics have proven difficult for countries emerging from crisis situations. Therefore, the mine-action community has by-and-by crafted an informal set of global support networks available to the landmine-impacted countries. Donor states, the United Nations, major non-governmental organizations, regional organizations and corpora-tions have formed a complex network of interrelated activities to help these countries. But the concept of building national independence from without—that is, by external forces—is tenuous at best. National ownership implies sovereignty and independence; yet foreign technical advisors, donor representatives, U.N. field workers, guest militaries and diplomats are often inserted into the process, sometimes ironically clouding the issue of national independence even while striving mightily to help develop strong national capabilities.

The above situation is the best-case scenario. Reports at both the most recent International Meeting of Mine Action Programme Directors and U.N. Advisors in July and Ottawa Convention States Parties Meeting in September suggest a significant number of impacted governments are just “not there” when it comes to accepting national ownership. The United Nations, United States, European Union and other donors and advisors would like to hop off the engine, but often they are alone in the cab and cannot take the risk of leaving the engine unattended.

Mainstreaming

If mine action is a viable and valid humanitarian endeavor, fit for intensive global efforts, it is because it is tied to the concepts of development, infrastructure, stability, credibility and security. In other words, the individual tragedies of landmine accidents, while emotionally compelling, pale in numerical comparison to other threats (AIDS, malnutrition, factional violence, motor vehicle accidents, etc.) which individually claim far greater numbers of victims than land mines.

Landmine action, therefore, should be given priority consideration among other national programs, to the extent that it supports socioeconomic development. Ah, but the rub comes when trying to disengage the highly successful mine-action juggernaut, which has carved out such a huge niche in defining its role among donors, non-governmental organizations, diplomats, journalists, governments and a worldwide public following, and fit it into a larger and less discrete development program. Many in the mainstreaming community are afraid to turn the chronic over to development officials and more toward the task of the train, out of sight of the engine, gauges and view ahead. Their reserves may range from the additional techniques of information gathering, to the purely selfish, but their concerns are real nevertheless.

Development plans and official donors are not always enamored with or cognizant of the complexities of mine action, nor are donors necessarily eager to pledge funds to support activities other than those specifically earmarked for mine action projects. It remains for those in the global community to foster vehicles such as the Millennium Development Goals7 to promote efforts to tolerate risks in areas of environment of trust and comfort in which mine-action activities can be integrated with other projects and programs.

Landmines and Other Explosive Remnants of War

To achieve any end, we must first determine what is impeding our way. The great railroad planners were able to scout ahead and surmise the challenges that terrain, indigenous populations and climate would pose. In the area of mine action, we were forced to add more and more threats to the initial concerns that began with the singular task of finding anti-personnel landmines.

We realized that battlefield and conventional war also usually contained unexploded ordnance. Then we had to add that caches of ammunition, small arms and light weapons, booby traps, and improvised explosive devices could each be part of a post-conflict environment. While the Ottawa Convention8 is concerned solely with APLs, countries have had to deal realistically with all potential explosive remnants of war. The landmine strategy has been successful, but it still needs to address the question of the growing threat of other EWR.

Some, such as Tim Carraux of Mines Advisory Group, argue that the mined weapon consideration must be taken into account and that donors and policy makers must accept the concept that landmines, small arms and light weapons, UXO, etc., must be considered and planned together in order to assure that the land is indeed safe and preparation for future development is assured.

The good news is that many organizations, such as the European Commission, the U.N. Mine Action Service and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining have taken the pragmatic step of including broader EWR considerations into mandates to support mine action, and some countries such as Cambodia have adopted a holistic approach to post-conflict EWR threats. The bad news is that this policy must deal separately with APLs and EWR as defined by the Ottawa Convention and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.9

Release of Land

When humanitarian demining was beginning as a new movement, it developed an admirable method for trying to identify mined areas—which after all, is the prerequisite to dealing with the landmine threat. Impact surveys were instituted in most countries at risk from APLs. Based on these surveys, suspected mined areas were identified. Predictably, in an effort not to pass over contaminated areas, many suspected mined areas were identified as mined when they were actually wired with mines. It now appears that upwards of 90 percent of operators’ time and resources are being spent in areas where there are no mines.8

It will require imagination and courage to deal with this situa-tion, for the cold, hard fact is massing square miles of land are declared out of bounds, which is a major factor keeping developing countries from expanding education, trade, agriculture and other development. Perhaps with a perceived “mine-free” flag and the challenges of identifying and releasing the wrongly identified land will require considering such ideas as tolerable risk, implementing new and improved technologies and techniques of investigation and classification, and reclassifying land under review, immediately placing land declared “released” from threat into productive use. Nergaard recommends greater use of technical research and geographic information systems, as well as employing new techniques of engagement and communication.

Perhaps the most basic challenge to having a safe and effective railroad journey is finding a definite schedule and timetable. While it is good to consider the millions of travelers, perhaps the greatest threat might be the engineer aware of its destination, this is the plight that many
Landmine Monitor champions for each point of view. Richard do not know where we want to go, no effective strategy can be planned, and we will surely never reach our goal.

There are various guidelines for global mine action, but none so universally applied as the requirements of the Ottawa Convention. Article 5 (Clearance) of that document appears to be unambiguous: “Each Party undertakes to destroy or ensure the destruction of all anti-personnel mines.” This means that there is no economic demand for the landmine, and that the States Parties are “Determined to put an end to the suffering of those who have lost limbs and other parts of their bodies as a result of antipersonnel mines.”

A number of nations have already made progress towards this goal, and many others have committed to doing so within the next decade. This comes at a time when there is no economic demand for landmines, and when the global community is committed to making the world safer.

The Rise of ERW as a Threat to Civilians

The combination of tank and air strikes was a crucial strategic principle in many of the region’s most important conflicts. In particular, the use of landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) has increased significantly in recent years.

One of the most significant developments in recent years has been the rise of landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as a threat to civilians. These devices are often used by non-state actors to disrupt military operations and create instability in the region.

It is therefore crucial to address the issue of landmines and improvised explosive devices as a threat to civilians. The international community should work together to ensure that these devices are not used, and that those who do use them are held accountable.

The methods used in warfare have changed over the years, creating new threats to civilians, such as those faced by the people who are bearings of landmines or IEDs.

There have been several instances of landmines being used as a weapon of war. In one case, a landmine was used to target a peacekeeper in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In another case, a landmine was used to target a civilian village in Afghanistan.

In this article, the author looks at the rise of landmines and ERW as military tactics from the First World War to current conflicts. The safety risk their presence poses and various measures to protect civilians are also discussed.

by Lt. Colonel Mohamed Tahgouilhould Ould Nema [Mauritania National Demining Office]

As time went on, the effectiveness of tanks and new weapons lessened the need for mines as a solution against armed attacks. For instance, during World War II the Indian, British and German forces all laid monumental landmines in northern Africa, but the mines weren’t as effective as in the past because the tanks used by the military could roll right over them without being affected. Because so many mines were employed, huge quantities of landmines and ERW remain today.

Increased Use of Missiles and Ordnance in the Gulf Wars

For instance, during World War I, landmines were used to create a “no man’s land” in the trenches. During World War II, landmines were used to block enemy advances.

The 34-day conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon that ended in 2006, involved a deployment of explosive weapons

S
ince the beginning of the 20th century, the world has witnessed several destructive and deadly wars. Two of the most horrific were the First and Second World Wars, during which explosives, engines, rockets and shells were used wildly. Many people died and large amounts of property were destroyed. Of great concern is that a significant number of people continue to be at risk due to the existence of thousands of explosive remnants of war, including landmines, resulting from these and other conflicts.

At some degree, landmines are losing their importance in the face of the new trends in military tactics, as can be observed in the recent massive military campaigns in Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Lebanon. For these conflicts, there have essentially been led as air strikes rather than ground attacks. This change in tactics produces a complicated situation in which children and other non-combatant civilians increasingly have to deal with a large quantity of unexploded debris (missiles, shells, rockets, bombs, engines) right in their own communities and homes. This new environment of the battlefield contributes to worsening significantly the living situation for civilians—buildings and bridges are destroyed; many fires spread due to the presence of instantaneous ammunition and explosives; burned iron and glass limit communities; people suffer a loss of electricity due to the destruction of electric power american, etc.

Consequently, civilian protection during a conflict nowadays should be the most important activity in the mine-action process. Otherwise, the most vulnerable civilians are still at risk or killed simply because they find themselves near military targets during air strikes, and later because of the potentially huge and unfortunate ERW risks that will be difficult to overcome in the aftermath of the conflict.

The two World Wars gave landmines an important tactical role. The combination of tank and air strikes was a crucial strategic principle for success during these wars. At the same time, in order to protect one’s own position from the infantry’s attack or an armoured assault, the soldier was equipped with landmines. They were used as an efficient way to harass the enemy, defend one’s own location, cover one’s troops from attackers and reinforce one’s military equipment. They were an important component of the tactical manoeuvre used that included artillery strikes, aircraft hits, and armoured and infantry attacks.

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