Contributing to Progress in Sri Lanka

Liz Wegman
People to People International

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Contributing to Progress in Sri Lanka

This article highlights the activities of People to People International in Sri Lanka. As part of its commitment to Sri Lanka, PPI not only assisted in the clearance of high-priority minefields, but also provided aid following the 2004 tsunami. Today, PPI remains dedicated to helping the Sri Lankan people.

People to People International was founded by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956 and is now led by his granddaughter Working with The HALO Trust, a nongovernmental organization specializing in the removal of war debris, PTF cleared 13 high-priority minefields totaling 9,392 square meters (2.3 acres) and containing nearly 600 mines in Sri Lanka since joining the U.S. Department of State’s Public-Private Partnership Program for Mine Action in 2002, according to Mary Jean Eisenhower, President and CEO of PTFI. People to People has embraced Sri Lanka and become a major contributor to the rebuilding of a country wrought by both man-made and natural disasters.

Today, PPI remains committed to helping Sri Lanka achieve its identified goal of becoming “mine-free,” thereby making it easier for the thousands of civilians who were displaced or forced out by the conflict to resettle in their homes and resume cultivating their land. In addition, PTFI has built three schools in the Jaffna area, which was hit hard by the December 2004 tsunami. The 20 years of civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam took place mainly in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, home to a significant number of ethnic Tamils. Both the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE used mines extensively throughout the course of the conflict. The HALO Trust established an operations base in the northern Jaffna district, where the landmine problem is most significant. Its focus is on government-controlled areas, though it does provide assistance in LTTE-controlled areas on request.

Mary Eisenhower and PTFI Deputy CEO Marc Bright made their first trip to Sri Lanka in late 2003 to visit the Jaffna region. Struck by the beautiful scenery left desolate because of the risks posed by mines, they returned with an increased determination to raise the funds necessary to finance a demining team.

Also in 2003, the government of Sri Lanka declared its goal of becoming a mine-free country within three years. The expansion of capacity needed to meet this goal is progressing more slowly than anticipated, forcing the date to be set back. Total clearance of high-priority areas, however, is achievable in 2007. The goal set for PTFI’s project included clearance of 13 minefields, all of which are high-priority sites. Areas where landmines lay in close proximity or denied access to schools were of main concern.

The first two cleared minefields were in the village of Chiruppiddi, approximately seven miles (11 kilometers) north of Jaffna town. It is a naturally fertile area—one of the best on the Jaffna peninsula. The soil allows several crops to be grown in rotation annually and the need to remove arable farmland was urgent. The demining team cleared two minefields of 341 mines, and farmers have subsequently returned to the land.

Next, the team moved 12 miles (19 kilometers) north of Jaffna to the village of Sigiripitiya, where many civilians lived. The landmine problem in Sri Lanka is a significant one. Ten years earlier, in 1992, a more than 40,000-square-meter (4.3-acre) minefield was cleared from this area, and more than 220 mines were removed. This minefield was separated from the school by nothing more than an old military defense line formed by a mound of dirt. It also denied access to agricultural land and blocked schoolchildren’s ability to cross the path that was used by over 400 schoolchildren each day; clearing it restored access to the school and thousands of arable farmland.

The second minefield in the Alaveddi northern region lay in an area affected by Sri Lanka Security Forces. People to People International’s mission is to assist the people of the country on the road to normal life in their native land. In less than a year, three new schools were built in the Jaffna region. Eisenhower and Bright returned a third time in April 2006 for the schools’ dedication ceremony.

Since 2003, Liz Wegman has played an active role in supporting People to People International’s mission of promoting peace, understanding and tolerance throughout the world. Wegman serves as Executive Director for PPI’s Operation Iraqi Children program and handles public relations for the organization.

Liz Wegman
Public Relations and Managing Director
Operation Iraqi Children
People to People International
3131 East Arrowhead Drive
Kansas City, MO 64109
Tel: 808-561-7502
Fax: 816-561-7502
E-mail: lizw@ptpi.org
Web site: http://www.ptpi.org

News Brief

Sweden Supports OAS

The government of Sweden provided US$800,000 to the Organization of American States to support demining work in Nicaragua. The grant will also support a mine-risk education program, “Safe Step without Mine,” and rehabilitation/reintegration services for landmine victims.

Operations made possible by the grant from the Swedish International Development Agency will be coordinated through the OAS Mine Action Program. The donation will advance the Nicaraguan National Demining Plan by about 90 percent.

The OAS reports that, in 1990, more than 550,000 Nicaraguans lived within five kilometers (three miles) of a landmined-infested area; currently, fewer than 45,000 people live under those conditions.

The OAS is considering an expansion of rehabilitation and social reintegration programs for landmine victims in other conflict situations, including Afghanistan and Vietnam.