A Firm Foothold: RONCO Operations in Sudan

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Protecting vulnerable human populations. The ICBL has done a great service in raising awareness about the damage caused by landmines. Much of their case rests on the fact that mines do not discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. As we know, the damage extends beyond the physical injuries themselves. The social stigma and the added economic burden that a loss of productive persons creates for victims and their families are additional harms.

Further harm results not from actual denunciations, but from the belief that landmines are present in the area. The threat of mines blocks access to vital resources such as land, water, housing, public buildings, infrastructure and transport. Avoiding injury requires curtailing or returning from subsistence or other productive. To make matters worse, mined roads prevent the transport of goods once collected or grown, thereby provoking income and trade.

However, while landmines can be used by someone on the outside to keep a group contained within a confined territory, so too can they be used to protect a group within a circumscribed territory by keeping danger out. Some now use them on the offense does not mean that landmines cease to play this defensive role. As we know, the damage ends far beyond.

Landmines were originally intended for purposes of defense; the fact that some now use them on the offense does not mean that landmines do not serve these purposes. Although proponents of the ICBL often work in or come from countries affected by landmines, the framework that they have developed does not seem to take into account all that it should. There is something wrong with the strategy on the extent that it includes vulifying those who try to protect others who do not wish to be included in conflicts. Perhaps even more troubling is to parents of children and farmers, or those who live far from the battlefront.

Self-defense of vulnerable populations. Although proponents of the ICBL often work in or come from countries affected by landmines, the framework that they have developed does not seem to take into account all that it should. There is something wrong with the strategy on the extent that it includes vulifying those who try to protect others who do not wish to be included in conflicts. Perhaps even more troubling is that the conditions of the vulnerable populations who are compelled to use mines to defend themselves when no one else will. Although people who oppose all landmine use have not caused the acute problems faced by vulnerable communities, I would suggest that the shifting of debate and the willful overlooking of such cases implicates them in terms of skewing our response to such communities. Although purportedly intended for landmines for self-protection, they must be particularly vulnerable. When the self-appointed authorities on the matter fail to acknowledge such cases exist, it makes it sound like there are no such cases, rendering the extent of their vulnerability invisible.

And when we pretend landmines never help, we worsen the situation of some communities. Because by denying them recourse to an effective tool, we make them more vulnerable. And by denying ourselves recourse to an effective tool, we make it easier to give ourselves permission to claim that there is nothing we can do either. See Estimates, p. 109

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Lusungu presents a variety of problems for mine-clearance operations. Control of the country, which had been set up after 1989, is now divided between the Sudanese government and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), with government forces claiming the majority of the north and both sides maintaining some control in the south. Both the government and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army used landmines throughout the civil war and as a result, landmines now pose a serious threat to civilians. For example, the United Nations reports that in 2004, landmines were responsible for more than 15 deaths and 30 injuries. The actual number of deaths and injuries is likely higher but goes unreported due to the difficulty of access throughout much of the south.

Over the past four years, RONCO has established a continuing presence in Sudan, following the Nuba Mountains ceasefire, with the deployment of quick-response teams to conduct emergency mine-clearance tasks. Currently, RONCO is creating and sustaining an indigenous mine-clearance, survey and disposal capacity in southern Sudan on behalf of the United Nations. In addition to the threat of extensive mined roads and infrastructure, RONCO had to overcome a number of obstacles; including inclement weather, disease and an increasing security threat due to rebel activity.

Sudan’s austere and hostile conditions are not dissimilar to those RONCO experienced in Afghanistan and Iraq, but as RONCO has discovered in those two countries, the long-term impact of the work far outweighs its challenges.

by John Lundberg [RONCO Consulting Corporation]
Internally displaced persons fleeing conflict areas such as the Darfur region are at particular risk because they have little or no local knowledge of potential threats and are often forced to move regardless of the potential landmine problem. Both the Sudanese government and the SPLA have accepted assistance from the United Nations, which is in the process of implementing a plan to eliminate Sudan’s landmine threat. In 2002, the United Nations established the National Mine Action Office in Khartoum, along with regional offices in central and southern Sudan, and various activities expanded through the early 2000s. From these locations, the United Nations carried out all phases of mine action, including mine clearance, mine-risk education, survivor assistance and stockpile destruction. The UNAMID is responsible for coordinating these efforts and helping build a lasting mine-action presence in the region. Unfortunately, operations have often been interrupted by the ongoing conflict.

Following the most recent peace-peace agreement between the government and the SPLA in January 2005, the United Nations moved quickly to establish the U.N. Advance Mission in Sudan with the goal of ensuring that the road to Malakal was not blocked by mines. From these bases, the United Nations carried out mine clearance operations in South Sudan.

The RONCO Response

In the wake of the above-mentioned conditions, in May 2005, the United Nations contracted RONCO to provide the mine-action capacity necessary to support its programs. In response, RONCO deployed two international clearance teams to conduct emergency clearance tasks and a training team to develop a Sudanese demining/explosive ordnance disposal capability in Wau and Malakal. Local capacity was also developed in the following areas:

- **Emergency EOD**
- **Mine clearance**
- **Bunker and stockpile clearance**
- **Rapid response**
- **Rapid landmine removal**

RONCO was uniquely prepared to quickly respond to the United Nations’ needs, having extensive experience clearing and deploying its Quick Reaction Demining Force, a Montenegrion-based team developed to respond to the mine threat on short notice.

RONCO initially deployed this force to Wau in June 2005, following the ceasefire agreement, where it greatly aided the safe return of internally displaced persons and increased the flow of humanitarian assistance through the Nuba Mountains. But the 2005 Sudanese deployment necessitated a more permanent force and the rapid development of local capacity. RONCO’s assistance included a management team, two international clearance teams and two training teams—each complete with medical and support staff, interpreters and all administrative, technical and logistical resources required. In just one month, this force was fully operational clearing.

It had established a new mission office in Khartoum, completed recruitment of local nationals, established two base camps in Malakal and Wau, began clearing landmines and establishing training programs, and completed all certification requirements. Moreover, the force was flexible enough to take on a variety of EOD/demining tasks, quickly and efficiently, train a local capacity, and cope with the unique challenges of demining in Sudan.

In September, under two additional U.N. contracts, RONCO began training EOD, bunker-clearance, mine-clearance and mine-risk education teams to conduct emergency clearance tasks and a training team to develop a Sudanese demining/explosive ordnance disposal capability. In Wau and Malakal, where they are interested in supporting RONCO’s teams, although they have also briefly deployed in support of other clearance organizations in the south. From these bases, the United Nations directed RONCO to suspend operations in Malakal for six days. In addition, security authorities were in the area stopping RONCO’s local nationals during their pre-deployment training at the training/work sites. These precautionary detentions were impacting RONCO’s ability to train and operate. In response, RONCO retained identity cards for its local nationals to vouch for their release.

**Supply challenges.** Keeping operations supplied is hardly routine in Sudan, as road access throughout much of the south is hazardous due to inadequate infrastructure, security issues, the presence of landmines and weather concerns, particularly during the rainy season. Supplying operations in Malakal proved especially difficult, as there is no road access to the city, necessitating the airlifting or barging of supplies down the Nile—a five-day trip from the nearest port, Kosti. In addition, the limited road access between Wau and Rumbek and the total lack of access between Rumbek and Juba also make air transport a necessity, even though it is expensive and, in Sudan, unreliable, sporadic, and subject to the weather.

Ronco’s supply challenges didn’t end there. Given movement into the country, RONCO cleared thousands of kilometers of roads. Within weeks of clearing the road to Kurdu, the population grew from 15 to 90, and the road to Juba was cleared, the population grew from 20 to over 100, significant increases that illustrate the importance of mine action in allowing refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their homes.

Clearance of the road from Juba to Yei involved overcoming numerous obstacles; and to bring long-term stability and developmental impact of the operation is already having a visible effect. The United Nations declared in November of 2005 the road as a high priority for clearance despite its location in the center of a highly dangerous area of the country. RONCO is pleased to continue building a local mine-action capacity in Sudan and to bring long-term stability and development to the country. With this help, Sudan will soon have a growing ability to independently sustain its own demining and clearance operations.

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John Lundberg was raised in Nairobi, Kenya, and now lives in Washington, D.C. He has an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School and a graduate of the College of William and Mary with graduate degrees from Florida State University, the University of New England, and the University of New England. His freelance articles have appeared in the Oil and Gas Journal, the New England Review and the Virginia Quarterly Review.

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