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Opening Roads to Angola’s Future

by Daniela Kempf [The Humpty Dumpty Institute]

Milk Sale Clears Mines

The Humpty Dumpty Institute funded the Road Threat Reduction Project with a grant made possible through the U.S. Department of Agriculture. HDI received US$778,000 from the sale of 500 metric tons (511 tons) of surplus dried milk. HDI used the proceeds from this USDA grant to fund HALO Trust’s landmine clearance operations in the Planalto region, once the most fertile and now the most densely mined part of Angola. A key element of the project was to clear the area of mines found in the roads; aid agencies cannot reach the villages and farmers cannot take their produce to market. The mines have a stranglehold on Angola post-conflict recovery and economic development. HDI helped change that. As a result of this project, over 350 kilometers (217.5 miles) of previously mined roads have been opened for traffic. An additional 15,000 square meters (161,458 square feet) of densely mined land around bridges, markers, farms and houses have also been cleared. Over 200,000 people living within five kilometers (three miles) of mined roads can now safely use these roads to get water from nearby rivers, access their farmland, sell their produce in markets, and send their children to school. It also helps them gain access to food aid and medical help, as other nongovernmental organizations and the World Food Program are now able to use the cleared roads to deliver food and medicine. New infrastructure and development, much needed as well as commercial trade and traffic, previously impossible because of mining, will now commence and benefit the population of the whole region, almost two million people in total.

Up Close and Personal

The project is making a real and immediate impact on the lives of people, as Francisco Luca and his colleague Lusinda Kuno (also a former soldier) told me during my recent visit to Angola. HDI was responsible for closely monitoring the project and meeting the USDA’s strict reporting requirements.


The only way to travel from Luanda, Angola’s capital, to the Planalto region is by plane, as the roads are mined and in otherwise bad condition. I flew to Lumuluma, a small, rickety plane, and from there, I was driven in a large loop metal detector in the front and a trailer with weights in the back to deactivate any mines not found by the detector. A team of manual deminers followed the truck and conducted manual verification with metal detectors. I was briefed by Gabriela Duarte Marques, the leader of the team, and talked to some of the deminers about their work and how it affects them and their families. All the deminers for this project have come from real communities affected by the landmine problem in Huambo and Bie provinces, and demining has provided them jobs, land, and a steady income. Two of the deminers I talked to, Albino Rafael Catimba and Pedro Domingo Nambi, who both have large families, were well-aware and proud of the positive impact their landmine clearance operations have on the community and the future of their country.

Landmines and Democracy

Clasping landmines and opening up the roads also has political implications. Angola is preparing for the first free parliamentary elections next year, and these newly opened roads will allow election officials to set up polling places and send international monitors to previously isolated and unreachable villages. When the day comes, voters will be able to go to the voting booths without the fear of landmines.

Angola is now free from war, but its people are still struggling with destruction, death, and displacement. It is critical to ensure that the peace process results in genuine and enduring peace. Angola’s main road from Kuito to Menongue was made safe from landmines during 26 years of civil war. Since the conflict ended in 2002, thousands of refugees are coming back to find their farms and access roads mined. Many villages are completely isolated from the outside world due to landmines found in the roads; aid agencies cannot reach the villages and farmers cannot take their produce to market. The mines have a stranglehold on Angola’s post-conflict recovery and economic development.

A few feet away. HDI cleared a small path to the river and the top of the bridge itself, so the villagers could have at least limited use of it until everything was cleared and declared safe.

While I was there, several women came to wash their clothes in the river and gingerly walked on the narrow path that had been cleared and marked, just inches away from the still-mined section. I also saw a group of 25 children cross the bridge that morning on their way to the nearby school, laughing and running past the deminers who were in full gear going about their dangerous work just a few feet away.

Since then, a total of 1,102 mines have been found at the bridge and destroyed, with 9,514 square meters (11,379 square yards) cleared. An additional 2,260 square meters (2,703 square yards) have been “threat reduced” by heavy rollers. All of the area currently not under water has been cleared.

The final part of the mine line by the river bank is expected to be cleared later in the year when the water level is low.

Making Roads Safe

I also visited HDI’s Road Threat Reduction demining team on the road from Kuito to Menongue, which is an important and long stretch of the only road from Angola to Namibia. This task was being conducted with a multi-drive truck that had a large loop metal detector in the front and a trailer with weights in the back to deactivate any mines not found by the detector. A team of manual deminers followed the truck and conducted manual verification with metal detectors. I was briefed by Gabriela Duarte Marques, the leader of the team, and talked to some of the deminers about their work and how it affects them and their families. All the deminers for this project have come from real communities affected by the landmine problem in Huambo and Bie provinces, and demining has provided them jobs, land, and a steady income.

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