Coming Home

Edward Pennington-Ridge
Adopt-A-Minefield

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Adopt-A-Minefield Survivor Assistance Consultant Ed Pennington-Ridge visited Afghanistan from May 1 through May 20, 2005. Despite the challenging security environment and anti-Western riots that began while he was there, his trip reinforced the importance of the work that AAM and other mine action organizations are doing in this country.

Nobody knows exactly how many people fled Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation and the inter-factional conflicts that followed. What is certain is that at least 2.5 million people have already returned to Afghanistan from Iraq and Pakistan, and many more return every day.

As border crossing points, brightly painted buses transporting the refugees roll by in an almost constant flow. The buses carry not just the people and off-road vehicles in carefully marked bays bordered with white painted stones, our briefing task: the clearance of a large family compound and the surrounding communal areas.

White ticks on the walls of buildings show that the area has been checked for mines and is safe, although there is a far better indicator of the area already cleared—they are full of people, with children playing, old men watching the world go by. Life is returning to this place just as fast as the deminers can clear the land. With 24 deminers, that’s about 260 square meters (one-half acre) per day.

Manual demining is a toruous business, but it is quite simply the only way to be sure that an area like New Bakhshi is safe. Mira Jan, a team leader with ATC, describes the enormity of the task with great gravity: “The flat area has been cleared by hand, every inch of soil removed with the tip of a bayonet.”

Deminers sweep a small area with their metal detectors, marking each metal signal with a small red disc. Another disc is placed eight inches from the centre of the signal and this marks the point where the deminer will begin to scrape away the soil. The minimum possible amount of soil is removed, just enough to identify the signal, but even so, every signal is likely to take at least two minutes to identify in ideal conditions. In the summer, when the ground is hard, the consistency of concrete, it can take much longer.

The presence of a metal signal is the only indication we have that a mine may be. The flat area has been checked for mines and is safe, although there may be two minutes to identify in ideal conditions. In the summer, when the ground is hard, the consistency of concrete, it can take much longer.

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The task of ATC 7 in New Bakhshi is easy to describe: They must remove every metal fragment from the soil within and immediately surrounding the buildings. The reality, however, is difficult to comprehend—the village was a frontline battlefield and metal fragments are everywhere. There are no shortcuts—each and every time the metal detectors signal a fragment, it must be identified, excavated and removed. Barbed wire, bullet or landmine, the signals are indistinguishable until a visual check is made.

ATC Field Officer Mohammad Arif explains why mines laid by Mujahedeen forces are much more difficult to detect than mines laid by Soviet troops. “The Soviets were trained to lay mines in a zigzag pattern, but Mujahedeen forces laid mines at random,” he says. “There is no pattern—and no clues as to where the next mine may be. The presence of a metal signal is the only indication we have that a mine may be in the ground.”

The short walk from the ATC project base area is a surreal experience. We are dressed in black jackets, helmets and plastic visors and must maintain a 5-metre (5.5-yard) distance between members of the party. We are an interesting spectacle for the local children as we tread gingerly towards the current demining task: the clearance of a large family compound and the surrounding communal areas.

As we leave the village, I stop to speak to a group of eight children from the village. They are an interesting spectacle for the local children as we tread gingerly towards the current demining task: the clearance of a large family compound and the surrounding communal areas.

Two of the miners were killed during this operation. One of them was a former Soviet soldier who lived in the valley. According to witnesses, he was killed by a Soviet landmine as he was returning from his home in the Soviet Union.

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