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RHINO in Cambodia

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the Committee for the Care and Protection of Children. Clear Path International is able to give injured children emergency medical treatment, surgeries, long-term health care, nutritional support and special scholarships. Funding for this project was received from a grant from the Freeman Foundation and contributions from individuals and foundations such as the Francis Finlay Foundation.

The Mission

Clear Path International is a non-profit organization founded in September 2000. Its efforts are concentrated in the war-torn countries of Southeast Asia. The goals of the organization include raising awareness of the landmine/UXO problem, providing money and resources for demining and victim assistance projects, and sponsoring programs to remove landmines/UXO and assist victims of landmine/UXO explosions. Through these goals, Clear Path International hopes to accomplish its mission: to clear obstacles that stand in the way of the health, safety and development of children and their families.

A Plan for the Future

Clear Path International hopes to empower local residents and agencies in mine-affected countries by creating "an in-country capacity that can sustain the demining and victim assistance activities well into the future, independently of with minimal support from the international community." By involving local residents and agencies from the start, "a hands-off management and implementation of the project(s) to a team of qualified domestic deminers with only periodic technical monitoring from the contractor, but with the presence of a full-time Clear Path International representative" is possible. For the time being, Clear Path International's efforts on behalf of the health, safety and development of mine-affected children and their families will be limited to Vietnam and Cambodia. In the future, the organization hopes to expand its project scope to Laos and Thailand.

Conclusion

While President Clinton's pledge to the Vietnamese government has led to dedicated efforts to rid Vietnam of landmines/UXO, the Bush administration has yet to make a statement on the future of U.S. involvement in landmine policy. Before leaving office, Clinton commented on the progress of his administration and encouraged the Bush administration to maintain U.S. efforts. "While I am proud that we have made substantial progress towards eliminating the threat landmines pose to innocent civilians around the world," Clinton wrote on Jan. 19, 2001, "there is work yet to be done. I urge the next administration to build on our progress and take the steps necessary to allow the United States to eventually sign the Ottawa Convention, while still meeting our security needs and protecting our men and women in uniform."!

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Photo courtesy of VVMF, CP and MAC

RHINO in Cambodia

RHINO, a large and powerful demining tool geared towards large clearance operations, has been put to the test—both on testing grounds and in the field. The result: a level of performance and operability that alleviates the concerns of critics.

By Manfred Joehnk, Program Manager

Background

The mechanical demining system RHINO was developed internally by Rheintalwerk Landsysteme GmbH (RLS) in Kiel, Germany, to provide a more cost-effective and safe demining tool. It is superior to existing systems in terms of efficiency, safety and clearing capacity and is especially well suited for large area demining operations. RHINO is large (9.5 m long, 3.1 m wide and 3.5 m high), powerful (660 kW caterpillar engine), robust (weights 58 metric tons) and is fully remotely controlled. RHINO is a serious demining machine, as opposed to a mechanical machine whose purpose it is to assist the manual deminers.

This article summarizes RHINO and the user experience during a field test and subsequent demining task conducted in Cambodia from August 1999 to May 2000. The test and the accompanying demining task in support of CARE took place in two remote areas in Battambang province. The main objective of the task was to accelerate the demining process to help accommodate the need for land for returning refugees. This was a major two-year project involving the resettlement of approximately 4,000 families.

The Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC), a state-run organization, is responsible for the conduct of mine clearance actions. The CMAC staff is assisted by international advisors from the United Nations and NGOs, as well as soldiers from countries such as Canada, Australia, Belgium and the Netherlands. The test and subsequent demining action were managed and performed by CMAC with the technical assistance of two RLS employees. After the initial training, their role was mainly to provide further training on the job for tasks such as unscheduled maintenance. Mine clearing in Cambodia represents a serious challenge. The environmental conditions are tropical and severe. The infrastructure is typical of a developing country. The mine problem itself is further complicated by the fact that there are numerous types of mines and UXO, and poorly marked mine-infested areas.

Operation by Indigenous Personnel

Training on RHINO began when it was arrived by barge at Sihanoukville. The RLS technicians trained three mechanics and two electricians in the operation and maintenance of RHINO. While lacking theoretical knowledge, the trainees were skilled workers and eager to learn. In a few short days they could handle the day-to-day operations and, soon after, maintenance of the vehicle. In a few weeks, they operated the system without the oversight of the RLS technicians. The five trainees were organized in two operation/maintenance teams of two each with the fifth being responsible for supply operations.

The challenge of leading the demining platoon was given to a CMAC technician who was assisted by a former leader of a mine training unit. They were initially trained and supervised by a French technical advisor. Manual deminers, drivers and guards rounded out the team. The platoon not only clearly demonstrated that indigenous personnel could operate and maintain RHINO, but that they also work hard and perform in a highly proficient manner throughout the initial test and subsequent tasks.

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Infrastructure

There is no question that mechanical demining machines are huge. The concern is that they are too big to be transported and will damage the infrastructure of developing nations. While the RHINO is a big machine, ingenuity will go a long way to solve most transportation problems. The infrastructure of Cambodia is especially weak from our point of entry (Sharonville) to the test area (approximately 600 km) and another 80 km to the operational site. The vehicle made the trip to the test area mostly on board a trailer and by rail. The critical parts of the roadway and underbuilt bridges were passed through use of the Cambodian railway and by driving the vehicle under its own power. RHINO traveled some 140 km of the trip at about 4 km per hour. The tiler units, which weigh 14 tons but is easy to remove, was replaced by the dozer blade. As a result, the trip was made without damage to roadway and bridges. RHINO was able to tow a truck that had been stuck in the road and upright a huge truck, which had overturned because of overloading and very large potholes in the road.

Self-Recovery

RHINO was bogged down twice in muddy, swampy terrain. Two methods of self recovery were:

• In the first case, the vehicle was bogged down in a mine-infested area. In accordance with regulatory procedures, two manual deminers had to clear the surrounding area before the recovery work could commence. An anchor was built by means of a steel plate and long iron rods. A rope was fixed on the anchor as well as an iron bar, which was fixed to the track plates at the rear of each track. With this arrangement RHINO was able to tow itself out of the mud.

• In the second case, the tiler unit was forced downwards in the ground to elevate the system while the rear of RHINO track formed the second base of the vehicle. Stones and wooden blocks were placed underneath to provide RHINO with traction to allow it to be driven out of the mud.

Operation in a Tropical Environment

RHINO was designed to operate in a tropical environment, so the high temperature and humidity, dust and very heavy rain in Cambodia did not have an adverse impact on it. RHINO proved its ability to work through huge termite hills as well as dense vegetation including any kind of bamboo. Trees up to 20 cm in diameter were processed by RHINO. All materials are ground between the two tilling drums. Some of the vegetation was worse than anticipated, almost inaccessible due to thick vines and trees up to 30 cm in diameter. RHINO was slowed down but not stopped. The grinding process continued. While our customer in Croatia clears 20,000 m² per day, RHINO was able to clear 4,000-6,000 m² per day in a very challenging environment. This is significantly more than a platoon of manual deminers can clear in a week. We learned that RHINO’s level feeders, which control the clearing depth, needed stronger protection for driving in reverse in such a challenging environment as Cambodia.

Quality Rate

The situation in Cambodia confirmed the operational results of our customers in Croatia who has cleared some 2 million m² in just over a year without a single mine found intact in the treated soil. PAIN mines without boosters were used in the Cambodian test to get information regarding the size of residuals of mines, which could not detonate. All mines treated during the special test were destroyed completely. All parts in the treated soil are passed through the small gap between the tilling drums. After successful completion of the test, CMAC’s Risk Assessment Committee agreed to place the system into operation.

After RHINO cleared the first area, the area was checked completely by manual deminers in accordance with regulatory procedures. As a result of this first recheck and test results, the manual recheck was reduced by 50 percent. Only harmless mine residuals and fragments were found by the manual deminers.

Survivability

RHINO got a chance to demonstrate its survivability characteristics early in the severe conditions in Cambodia. During the first week of operation, a booby trap consisting of two AT mines detonated at approximately 50 cm under RHINO’s left track. Later, a single AT mine detonated between the two tiller drums near the bearings, and another AT mine detonated under RHINO’s right track. In less than two days, the detonations from the single mines were repaired in the field by the CMAC maintenance personnel. The double mine explosion caused more severe damage to mechanical parts and was repaired in the field in about a week.

There was no threat to human life with these explosions because RHINO is unmanned and remotely controlled. An operator sitting in the cab of any manned clearing system would have been severely injured or killed by the double mine explosion.

Too Costly to Operate?

RHINO’s deployment in Cambodia has demonstrated that the system is used as intended and is operated in a day-to-day demining operation, its clearance speed is outstanding. Our cost study can demonstrate the cost effectiveness of RHINO when compared to a manual demining operation. RHINO is superior in that it:

• can be operated and maintained by indigenous personnel after a qualified training on the job
• can be transported without damaging the infrastructure, even under the conditions of developing country, by smart and flexible use of available resources
• disposes of sufficient self recovery means even in real swampy ground
• is working reliably also in tropical environment
• is one of the first reliable demining machines, which is much more efficient than manual deminers, and which makes manual rechecking of the ground unnecessary
• has an outstanding survivability against AT mines, UXO and booby traps and offers excellent safety due to its remotely controlled operation
• will speed up the demining process and reduce the costs per cleared square meter.

Conclusion

RHINO is a real demining machine. In the Cambodian operation, it has proven to be both safe and cost effective. If the world is going to make serious progress in solving its mine problem in a reasonable time frame, cost effective and efficient demining systems such as RHINO must be part of the solution.

The crucial requirements to use RHINO are an open mind, good planning, logistic as well as site management, and the international will set up a long lasting demining project with multinational sponsorship.

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