Mine Action – A Model for Other Global Challenges?

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Mine Action
A Model for Other Global Challenges?

by Dennis Barlow, Director, Mine Action Information Center

A FEW SHORT YEARS AGO the humanitarian demining task seemed insurmountable. Not only was the prospect of eliminating landmines as a global threat deemed unachievable, but the political and organizational landscape was new, diverse and unchartered.

A Brave New, and Complicated, World

Humanitarian demining, if not a new phenomenon, was new in a global community which had only just shed its Cold War cloak and was trying to cope with emerging regional threats to stability, independence movements, civil warfare, refugee surges, factional aggregations and border challenges. The organizations involved in demining were as varied as the kinds of landmines and UXO, which dotted the landscapes of some 60 threatened countries. Newly formed, but highly motivated and effective NGOs such as Halo Trust, Norwegian People’s Aid, and the Mines Action Group (MAG) were soon joined by other NGOs, for-profit corporations, international organizations, military task forces, donor nations and concerned individuals.

The problem was that such diverse organizations, performing a plethora of what we now call mine action functions, were engaged all over the world in an uncoordinated and sometimes dysfunctional process. Everybody wanted to do well, but there was no coordinating mechanism to minimize, integrate, record, implement and evaluate overall plans and operations. Even worse, the modus operandi of these various organizations rarely brought them into contact with congruent organizations. Whatever cooperative global, regional, or sectoral efforts were devised had to be engineered with little precedent and even less authority.

The Success of the Humanitarian Demining Model

What has happened in the past five years has been just short of a political miracle. Out of the chaos of many individual organizations just trying to “do good” has emerged a community of humanitarian mine action activists and operators which has collectively, professionally, and quietly created what may be a model for other international efforts.

The newly appointed Director of the U.N. Mine Action Service (UNMAS), Martin Barber, observed this new state of affairs in his address to the Fourth International Meeting of Mine Action Directors in Geneva on Feb. 5, 2001. Having the perspective of one “returning to the vineyard,” he remarked upon the extraordinary cooperation of many groups and the seamless nature of operations as a matter of course in mine action today.

I must admit to some shock at hearing that observation, and yet it took me only a few moments’ reflection to realize that he was absolutely correct. Having been involved in this issue from 1994, I—like many others immersed in the challenges and everyday stiffness of demining issues—had failed to appreciate the extraordinary cooperation of many groups and the seamless nature of operations as a matter of course in mine action today.

10 Innovative Approaches to Mine Action

Conferences and Workshops. The acceptance of a new challenge dictated that a series of conferences, seminars, and workshops, needed to be held to both frame the challenges of demining and to get to know the players. As a result of an aggressive schedule of such meetings, many partnerships, alliances, dialogues, concerns and plans for action have resulted. These gatherings have targeted various demining groups, functions and issues, and have become “real-time” clearinghouses for ideas and “next steps” and have offered framed such hot demining topics as the use of mine detecting dogs, geographical systems requirements, donor concerns, standards, management questions, etc.

Advocacy Groups. While the “anti-personnel landmine ban” organizations are often recognized for their devotion to advocacy, they have also been very active in supporting humanitarian demining, mine awareness and victim assistance projects. Besides performing groundbreaking survey and database work, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, through the publication of its monumental Landmine Monitor Report, has produced an invaluable resource relied upon by the entire mine action community.

R&D. One of the most frustrating aspects of mine clearance is the lack of what has been called the “silver bullet” solution to the problem. Perhaps a greater challenge is that the market and procurement path for technologies designed for humanitarian applications is murky. Despite the difficulties, however, many donor nations have developed creative approaches to the problem. As a result, new demining technologies are continually being developed. Of special note is the effort to unify much of the work being done around the world under the rubric of the International Test and Evaluation Program (ITEP). The ITEP approach promises to be an effective way to avoid R&D duplication and point the way to an impartial and effective evaluation process.

Civil-Military Cooperation. The role of militaries in supporting mine action has for some time been controversial. Nevertheless, many nations—both those providing assistance and those afflicted with landmines—have re-configured and trained various elements within their militaries to accept this mission.

A recent conference of militaries providing these services has revealed improved coordination efforts with NGOs, host-nations, recipients and other organizations.

Military humanitarian assistance roles are not essentially in the mine clearing areas, but in providing technical advice and training, mine awareness support, victim assistance, research and development venues, and the procurement of equipment and supplies.
Surveys. In determining the kinds of mine action required, as well as to arrive at a meaningful prioritization and development plan, it is critical that an appropriate survey be conducted. However, there are many surveys and methodologies to measure the. The humanitarian demining community has developed a number of excellent instruments to measure various relevant data on suspected landmine-contaminated areas and the resulting socioeconomic impacts. These surveys have yielded invaluable data, which can suggest the proper scope of a campaign and greatly increase the efficiency of an operation. The impact surveys now exist for both the Survey Action Center (under the control and guidance of the Vietnamese Veterans of America Foundation and UNMAS, respectively) and producing just such data.

Public-Private Partnerships. A novel concept for maximizing public participation and support of humanitarian demining activities has been the identification of private or educational organizations to participate actively in the process. This approach has the benefit of allowing private donors to get more directly involved. It increases the number of people who gain a realistic and "up-close" perspective into the nature of the effort, while, at the same time, raising much-needed funds and increasing the range of activities undertaken within mine action. Both the Adopt-A-Minefield project and the Superman and Superwoman comic books are examples of the above programs, which have also been defined by trial and error, such as the American Red Cross's in the mine action arena and recommends policy guidance. Signatories to the Ottawa Treaty meet semi-annually under the auspices of UNMAS and the GICHD in Geneva to stay abreast of current trends and suggest various plans of action. The bottom line is that virtually no nation goes without the opportunity to gain access or input into the various groups within the demining community.

Academia. At an important demining conference held in Helbingen, Denmark, in 1996, it was noted that universities had much to contribute, but were silent in their application to the landmine issue. Today, many universities are key players in the mine action community: Cranfield University in England is conducting a highly successful mine action manager's course; JMU acts as a major mine minefield information hub; and the University of Western Arial has become a leader in the development of low-tech, but highly effective protective gear for deminers. A whole host of schools are now involved in clearance R&D, while others are offering courses directly related to landmine challenges.

It is interesting to note that approaches to meeting the unique challenges posed by the landmine threat have been accomplished in a variety of ways. For example, the top 20% of the world's landmine explosions occur in the Middle East, and the majority of these explosions are caused by landmines that have been laid as a result of conflict. In many instances, these explosions are caused by landmines that have been laid as a result of conflict. The majority of these explosions are caused by landmines that have been laid as a result of conflict.