Summary of MAG Achievements in Iraq, March–May 2003

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This article highlights the demining efforts and accomplishments of the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) in Iraq.

by Sean Sutton, MAG

MAG has worked in northern Iraq since 1993 and has a large and well-developed mine action programme conducting landmine clearance, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), survey, area demarcation and mine risk education (MRE) activities. This programme employed 700 Kurdish staff members who were supported by two expert mine advisors, fielding 17 Mine Action Teams and 14 Mine Risk Education Teams in the three northern governorates of Sulaimaniyah/New Kirkuk, Duhuk and Erbil.

Prior to the beginning of the recent conflict, donors supported MAG's emergency preparedness activities in the region. This was primarily aimed at reducing the risk of injury or death to the hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees who began moving to remote areas of northern Iraq in fear of the impending conflict. MAG focused its efforts on demarcating known dangerous areas where the thousands of displaced Kurds were expected to head. MAG erected large billboards, distributed flyers and conducted MRE with travellers to pass on the key message: "stay on the road." Radio and TV messages were also broadcast, reaching an estimated 500,000 people.

MAG posted additional expert mine advisors to support the programme as it moved into an emergency configuration. MAG was operational before, during and after the recent conflict, with staff working seven days a week at the busiest time, MAG continued to conduct demining and EOD activities throughout the conflict and expanded its operations into former government of Iraq (GOI) areas as the Coalition forces pushed south. While the conflict was ongoing MAG started re-planning its work with the aim of reducing injury and death to Kurdish internally displaced persons (IDPs) who would soon start returning to areas around Kirkuk and Mosul. Due to the vast amount of abandoned ammunition and UXO, and the presence of many unmarked minefields in these areas, MAG has now focused the majority of its capacity in former GOI areas around the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul, and along the former "green line," as security allowed access. With recently approved Department for International Development (DFID) funding, MAG is currently establishing a new mine action capacity in Mosul.

MAG also positioned staff in Kuwait prior to hostilities, enabling them to move quickly into southern Iraq to begin assessment activities as soon as the security situation allowed. MAG was able to immediately commence a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)-funded MRE project in southern Iraq, and will soon have an EOD and landmine clearance capacity in the south.

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Putting Sea Mammals to Work: Dolphins Help Coalition Forces in Iraq

In the first month after arriving in Iraq, the dolphin teams achieved a number of successes, including unofficial clearance of 913 naval miles of water, investigation of 237 objects, and recovery and/or destruction of over 100 mines.

by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

Dolphins Helping Out in Iraq

Iraqi forces laid sea mines in Umm Qasr, Iraq's only deep-water port, as they withdrew from the area in late March. Thus, before humanitarian aid ships could enter, the area had to be cleared of sea mines. This mission marked the first time the NMMP dolphins were used in a combat environment. Military personnel from the United States, Australia and Britain—including 50 divers with sophisticated underwater equipment—spent four days clearing the port with the help of the dolphin teams.

Several dolphins in all helped out in the region: Tacoma and Makai arrived first, and they were later joined by Jefe and Kahili, two males, and Kona and Purani, both females. In mere hours, the team had cleared a path for the Sir Galabah, a humanitarian aid ship. After clearing a 50-mile shipping lane in the port, the teams began clearing hazardous explosives from a wider area. The dolphin teams were also being employed to help clear the Khawr Abdullah waterway, which connects Umm Qasr to the Gulf.

The dolphins were well taken care of during their deployment: veterinarians and handlers monitored their health carefully. The group in Iraq adapted fairly well, probably because the Gulf is similar to their normal environment. One dolphin, Tacoma, left the area for about 48 hours, and some were worried he was gone for good. He did return, however; as their trainer, Aviation Ordnanceman First Class Dee Jennings, says, "They take day trips. They're not missing. We do have tracking devices on them, but we don't worry about it. They always come home."