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Myths, Mines and Ground Clearance

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Myths, Mines and Ground Clearance

Building on an article published in issue 2.3 of this Journal, the author discusses some of the prevailing myths that beset the humanitarian demining (HD) industry and which he believes restrict its progress. Intended as a discussion prompt, some of the points he makes may be contentious.

by Andy Smith, AVS Mine Action Consultants

In 1998, I wrote an article for this journal about common myths in mine clearance. Since that time, I have received many messages supporting what I wrote, and none taking the opposite view. The last of these messages was received just a couple of months ago—showing that the online back issues of this journal are still being used. It may be useful for you to read over that article before arguing strongly against anything in this article (see http://mac.jmu.edu/journal/2.3/features/myths.htm).

Looking over the original article, I would change a few lines and alter the areas here and there, but I believe that the list remains a relevant record of unhelpful myths.

Some have been partly addressed, then forgotten. For example, the development of the new International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) was based on an acceptance that it was not up to the West to dictate details of operation to National Authorities. This was largely responsible for the relative success of those standards, but may be being forgotten as more standards are added and the original User Focus Group is marginalised. A few have become more complicated. For example, the use of modern munitions that act as mines but are not designed as mines complicates the question of whether mine use is really in decline in some areas.

Critics often present the "man with a pro" as an unprofessional carrerist technology. In fact, it is more sophisticated than any artificial device yet available. No matter how many millions of dollars are thrown at robotics, it will be a very long time before machines equal the sophisticated array of data gathering and processing equipment that is a human being. When that is finally achieved, it will be even longer before that technology can be built into a low-cost, autonomous, self-sustaining and self-replicating robot the size of a deminer.

"More mines are being laid than cleared today."

While still quoted by the general public, I hear this argument less often than in former years—which is ironic because there is more truth in it now than there was five years ago. In conflict areas (Chechnya, Iraq, for example), more mines have been placed than cleared in the last year. But in those post-conflict areas that have a mature mine action programme (Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Croatia, Kosovo, Kurdistan Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mozambique, etc.), the claim is simply untrue. Sustained demining efforts have cleared vast areas of land without any significant replacement of mines and ordnance. The process has supported the establishment of stability in many ways and has been an essential part of internationally supported efforts to break cycles of violence.

"Mines have no place in modern warfare."

The truth is that as long as conflict continues, victim-initiated devices (mines) of one kind or another will be used. We cannot use up the "blessed All Available Means" (BAAM) is normal. International efforts to alter the BAAM mindset seem to be the only way to change this. Genuine concern over the long-term effects of weapons will only become "faceable" if led by the worlds' dominant military forces. At present, Russia, China and the United States have not banned the use of anti-personnel landmines—and all continue to develop other indiscriminate weapons that serve as victim-activated devices. The willingness to use mines in recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya seems to have reversed the success of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). So, at the start of the new millennium, numbers of anti-personnel landmines are falling. But the use of increasingly indiscriminate weapons is increasing.

"You can meet deminers and find out about demining at conferences."

I define a "humanitarian deminer" as someone whose principal day-to-day activity involves using his/her eyes, dogs, metal detectors, provders or other means to physically clear areas believed to be mined. These are almost invariably local people. A deminer is not someone you will meet at a conference or someone who is paid a Western salary. These people may be Demining Managers and Technical expertise (EOD). But, they do not actually clear mines themselves. I can think of only a handful of ex-par who regularly demine among the many hundreds I have met in my travels, and these ex-pats do so out of an obsessive personal commitment, not because they are paid to do so. The ex-pat is far more economically occupied in training and management tasks (often 20 local deminers can be employed for the same daily salary of one ex-pat, not to mention other costs).

"Demining is a specialist activity that takes a long time to learn."

In almost all countries with an active HD sector, mine field deminers are relatively uneducated local men. They may have a military background, but this background will not have involved any in-depth training in mine detection and removal. Some organisations have new deminers working in a free area within 10 days of starting their training. These deminers will then work alongside a more experienced person for further "on-the-job" training. This system works, and given the available accident information, it looks as if the highest risk time among deminers is not their first week or even their first year of work. The truth is that while demining is a specialty activity, it does not take long to learn.

"The rules of HD must be set by Western specialists."

When I wrote on this last time, the United Nations' published rules were widely ignored even in programmes under the control of the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS). Companies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) made up their own rules, often in competition with each other, so best practices were not shared. With the development of improved IMAS, this situation has changed for the better. Based on widespread consultation and flexibility, the current IMAS are far more useful than their predecessors. They are being widely adopted by individual groups and National Authorities around the world. Even military demining efforts are increasingly using the IMAS as a starting point, although a few of the oldest demining organisations hold out and insist on doing things as they have always done.

So the rules have changed under the leadership of Western specialists, people who took great pains to achieve widespread practicality. They led the process, and they led the process with the real world in mind. As a result, this has been a positive move. The exclusion of potential bidders was equally beneficial, and has led to a reduction in the number of companies involved in demining.

The truth is rare. The West- ern suppliers of equipment are ultimately responsible for establishing a reasonable standard of equipment that is adequate. It is also true that there is little evidence to support the claim that the equipment is adequate. The military is not always on the right side of the argument.

**The equipment supplied to our military is far from ideal, so should be used in HD.**

The reasons why military equipment is rarely the “best” for demining are varied, including high cost, inappropriate design for the purpose and unnecessary complexity. Military uses are not the same as those for HD.

**Locally made demining equipment is always of a lower quality.**

This is often a clear assumption based on the attitude of equipment purchasers. It is an attitude fostered by Western suppliers of equipment who prefer everyone to source from them. The demining supply industry is a sophisticated, hard-sell extension of the arms supply business, so no one should expect it to be without its problems. The main advantages of these suppliers having their equipment supplied from local sources are low cost, ready availability and easy maintenance.

The truth is that locally made tools and equipment exist and are widely used. Sophisticated items such as blaster rifles, body armour and blast-resistant hand-tools are also made and supplied regionally in Asia and Africa.

**“Mine cleared is a life or limb saved.”**

It is often said that “every mine cleared is a life or limb saved,” a statement linked to the notion that “demining is so slow that it makes sense to speed it up by reducing the quality of the clearance.”

The truth is that inadequate clearance of an area can lead to local people believing that the area is safe—and so starting to use it again. Their risk of injury or loss is increased because some of the devices were cleared.

In the case of a mine cleared, it can be directly responsible for a limb loss. It is frequently argued that “area reduction” need not be as thorough as clearance—so it should be acceptable to use methods that are known to be inefficient. Flails and other roller systems are favourites—many of which are known to be incomplete and not effective in removing devices and all of which have UNO intact. The advocates of these machines conveniently ignore the fact that UNO causes as many civilian injuries as mines in many countries.

The local people watch the impressive machine work and believe that the “reduced” area is actually a “safe” area, so the distinction between “area reduction” and “area clearance” is lost on them. They enter an unsafe area with false confidence.

There is a reason that people make these arguments is a desire to find a use for the machines—developed with millions of dollars of research money but never able to achieve the clearance levels of manual deminers. Another reason is the perceived need to increase the speed of clearance by using machines.

The truth is that it is better to mark a dangerous area clearly and leave it until later than to release a dangerous area for use.

**“Demining is too slow.”**

It is frequently said that it is obvious that the fact that we are just not working fast enough—and that this justifies spending huge amounts of money trying to develop a faster way of clearing the ground than by using manual deminers. But manual demining is not necessarily too slow—it offers the advantage of lack of funding but sometimes due to inefficient management. In many areas, it is remarkably thorough and fast, using manual deminers assisted by machines and dogs.

Experience in Europe proves evidence that speed of clearance is not really the issue. More than 20 commercial IOD companies still operate in Germany, and thousands of tons of WW1 ordnance are known to still litter old battle areas in Belgium and France. What is necessary is to establish a sustainable local demining capacity—because some clearances need to be made in years or decades, no matter how fast people work today.

The truth is that manual demining is only too slow when the necessary funds are not available or are not used as efficiently as possible. The truth is that spending clearance money on speculative R&D does not clear any ground at all.

**“Never mind clearance, build the area and move on.”**

While it would be convenient if HD really did involve a known number of finite tasks that could be prioritised and finished with mechanical precision, past experience shows that this is just a pipe dream. If it is accepted that problems with EWK will remain for decades or even a lifetime, the need to develop a sustainable national capacity becomes paramount.

This imperious notion of HD completely away from the mechanistic in-and-out mindset of a military operation and into the field of “sustainable development.” Many people recognise this, but the industry is still dominated by ex-military personnel at all levels. The reason for this dominance is that demining requires any military training or skills—especially not those of senior officers. I believe that the main reason is that HD was seen as a job opportunity for the many ex-officers who have set out to learn about the countries and cultures with whom they find themselves—and about HD as opposed to military minefield clearing.

But the majority of these in high positions in this industry have no relevant training or preparation for a role that requires the intelligent promotion of “sustainable development.” Even the exceptions tend to have short-term assertions that do not allow sensible long-term planning.

To be fair to them, it is not always obvious who should replace them. The “development” profession has had rather too many “failures” to inspire great confidence. So those with experience in development programmes are not necessarily any better qualified, and even when they are, they frequently believe that you need soldiers to deal with explosives.

The truth is that a new profession of HD is emerging with people “trained” by on-the-job experience. Some of these are ex-soldiers and some ex-development workers.

If the industry is to progress, the leaders of the old school must move aside to let those who do have the relevant experience to promote “sustainable demining” take over. Many of these are ex-soldiers—but demining management should not be allowed to be a sinecure (or a retirement home) for old officers.

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*Your comments and arguments would be appreciated (see contact information below).*

*All graphics courtesy of the author.

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