Opportunities for Regional Cooperation in Mine Action in Southeastern Europe

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Opportunities for Regional Cooperation in Mine Action in Southeastern Europe

by Ian Mansfield, Operations Director, GICHD

Introduction

At many of the international conferences held over the past years dealing with landmine issues, the meeting conclusions invariably contained a call for a greater regional approach to address landmine problems. In most cases these were just words, and at first glance there was little evidence of regional cooperation in mine action, or that such an approach would bring any immediate benefits to mine-affected communities.

The reason for this lack of a regional approach is partly due to the nature of the landmine problem itself. In general, the mines that have been deployed are buried in the ground and do not move over national borders. This is in contrast to other types of weapons such as legal drugs or diseases, which easily move across sovereign boundaries and obviously affect a region as a whole. In addition, UN resolutions dealing with landmines and the UN Policy states that “the primary responsibility for taking action against the presence of landmines lies with the concerned state.”

Most donors have policies that reflect the UN response, and they support projects on a country-by-country basis. Lastly, although nations may exist in the same region, they have been previously suspicious between them, or they often have language and cultural differences that make taking a regional approach difficult. For example, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are all in the same region, but they have different languages.

The response to the landmine problem in Central America is one example of a regional approach. It has been coordinated by the Organization of American States (OAS), but has tended to be mainly organized on a military-to-military basis, with a focus on mine clearance. SE Europe (and the Balkans in particular) seems to offer prospects for greater benefit from a regional approach. The Balkan countries have a common history and background, a similar governmental structure, and most have the same spoken language. Also, dealing with all the aspects of mine action, including mine risk education (MRE), survey and clearance, victim assistance, stockpile destruction and the fulfillment of common Ottawa Treaty obligations, increases the opportunities available for a cooperative response.

Areas of Concern

Political Level

At the political level, there are already a number of organizations that deal with SE Europe on a regional basis, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Stabiliy Pact. These organizations should be encouraged to develop programmes to strengthen the linkage between mine action and other sectoral responses. Some ten years ago, the “Recon Group” was formed under the auspices of the Working Table III of the Stability Pact to address the landmine situation. While the group has probably yet to reach its full potential, it does bring together senior government officials from the region on a regular basis to discuss political issues relating to landmines.

Another body, the Southeast Euro­ pean Mine Action Coordination Committee (SEEMACC) was formed in 2000 and deals with more practical issues of coordination at the operational level. Perhaps the greatest area for cooperation at this level lies with the AP Mine Ban Convention (or Ottawa Treaty). The goal of a “mine-free Balkans” now seems achievable with the recent announcement by Serbia and Montenegro that they will accede to the Treaty (the last Balkan country to do so). The aim should now be for a “mine-free SE Europe.” All of the obligations of the Convention, including the requirement to clear all mines in 10 years, are achievable in this region.

Strategic Level

At what I would call the strategic level, it is unlikely (or unnecessary) that a regional mine action strategy would be developed for SE Europe. However, it would be useful if all the national strateg­ ies or action plans developed by the countries contained common elements. The use of common terminology and standard reporting forms are one example. Information Management System for Mine Action (TIMMA) developed by the General Secretariat for International Min­ imization Demining (GICHD) would make elaboration of the mine problem more logical, and it would become easier to gauge progress. The development of national standards based on the Interna­ tional Mine Action Standards (IMAS) would allow for consistency of operations, as would a common accreditation system for mine action operators in the region.

Organizational Level

More needs to be done for regional cooperation probably exist at the operational level. There is already dialogue between Serbia and Montenegro on mine action issues, the clearing of bordering minefields, shared use could consist of expensive or high technology equipment. For example, the role of a regional database has been fore­ seen for the “mineviewer” after its test in Kosovo, then its cost and work promotion. The database has been deployed in the region.

The allocation of specialist training responsi­ bilities to a regional training body has also started—two examples include the MINE Centre in Athens and the landmine demining school in Montenegro. The IMAS can provide a common basis for activities like minefield marking systems, MRE messages, joint purchase of high-tech equipment and the like.

Such cooperation exists in the region, to build up the management training courses already conducted by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) through Cranfield University and local partner institutions. Sharing practical skills can be enhanced by more exchanges of national mine action programme staff under the UNDP’s Mine Action Exchange (MAX) programme. Opportunities should be explored for victim assistance activities, such as sporting competitions or cultural exchanges. Shared technical, practical or psychological services may be an option, but taking people away from family or local support systems needs to be carefully assessed.

Technical Level

At a more technical level, the con­ duct of joint trials or testing of equip­ ment would result in savings, or at least an agreement to share national level test results would help. The recent develop­ ment by the European standards organ­i zation (CEN Working Group) of a standard methodology for metal detector trials should be utilized in the fullest extent. With regard to information exchange, the current work by the GICHD on the XML project will al­ low different databases to “talk” to each other and exchange data. The GICHD is about to expand on the Database of Demining Accidents (DDAS), which is a method of collecting accident work­ place accidents involving deminers from around the world. These reports will then be exchanged to highlight trends and to identify changes in techniques, equip­

Programme

Funding

The final area to be considered is funding. The competition for donor funds, national budgets, responsibilities of governments when taking out Work­ banks loans and the project nature of funding tend not to favour a regional approach. However, the establishment of the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance (ITF) has introduced a new element to this situation in the Balkans. Despite some initial skepticism when it was es­ tablished in 1996, the ITF has been able to serve as a conduit for other donor funds to the region—and mainly due to the dollar-for-dollar matching arrangement with the United States. The fact that the ITF is located in Slovenia (a non-mine­ affected country in the region) has helped create an aura of neutrality about its operation, and the ITF has been able to develop stan­ dardized tendering and contract manage­ ment as well. The ITF has also been able to fund some regional coordination activities, such as the project of SEEMACC, which has helped them to function without drawing on national funds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, mine action has tended to develop on a country-by-country basis, despite the often superficial calls for a regional ap­ proach. However, the experience of the Balkans has shown that under certain cir­ cumstances, regional activities already exist and have a made a difference and that oppor­ tunities exist for increasing regional activities and cooperation in the future.

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Little Hand

Little hand, that busy hand
That played in sand and tossed a stone
That slept beside your weary head
That grasped your father’s hand so tight
As you walked through the loud bazaar

On little hand, oh busy hand!
Do not be afraid of that toy
That looks so strange, just lying there
Whose only boring reddened stones
Are found among the blasted nuts.

On little fingers, busy fingers!
Find other things to touch today,
Remember what your father said
About those curious, metal things
That you so want to show your friends.

Oh little hand, small brown hand!
That touch your mother’s gentle face,
Reach up to climb another rock
Leave curious things where they lie,
And wonder not at strange delights!

Oh little hand, where are you now?
A dried, brown bandage took your place
Where have and disgust your palm?
No, no my son, it won’t now come
That curious thing took it away.

Oh little son, my little boy,
We loved that little hand too much
And all the games it used to play
But I have you and you have me
At least for one more hungry day.
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Introduction

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The reason for this lack of a regional approach is partly due to the nature of the landmine problem itself. In general, the mines that have been deployed are buried in the ground and do not move over national borders. This is in contrast to other regional threats, such as illegal drugs or diseases, which easily move across sovereign boundaries and obvi­ously require a regional effort.

In addition, UN resolutions dealing with landmines and the UN Policy states that “the primary responsibility for clearing and removing the presence of landmines lies with the concerned state.” Most donors have policies that reflect the UN response, and they fund specific projects on a country-by-country basis. Lastly, although nations may exist in the Western Hemisphere, there may be disputes over internal borders or cultural differences that make creating a regional approach difficult. For example, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are all in the same region, but they have different languages. The response to the landmine problem in Central America is one example of a regional approach. It has been coordi­nated by the Organization of American States (OAS), but has tended to be mainly focused on a military-to-military basis, with a focus on mine clearance. SE Euro­pe (and the Balkans in particular) seems to offer prospects for greater benefit from a regional approach. The Balkan coun­tries have a common history and back­ground, a similar government structure, and most have the same spoken language.

Also, dealing with all the aspects of mine action, including mine risk education (MRE), survey and clearance, victim assistance, stockpile destruction and the fulfillment of common Ottawa Treaty obligations, increases the opportunities available for a cooperative response.

Areas of Concern

Political Level

At the political level, there are already a number of organizations that deal with SE Europe on a regional basis, such as the Organization for Security and Coop­eration in Europe (OSCE) and the Stability Pact. These organizations should be encouraged to develop programmes to strengthen the linkage between mine action and other sectoral responses. Some years ago, the “Reay Group” was formed under the auspices of the Working Table III of the Stability Pact to address the landmine situation. While the ground has definitely been laid to reach its full potential, it does bring together senior government officials from the region on a regular basis to discuss political issues relating to landmines.

Another body, the Southeastern Euro­pean Mine Action Coordination Committee (SEEMACC) was formed in 2000 and deals with more practical issues of coordination at the operational level. Probably the greatest area for cooperation at this level resides with the AP Mine Ban Convention (or Ottawa Treaty). The goal of a “mine-free Balkans” now seems achievable with the recent announcement by Serbia and Montenegro that it will accede to the Treaty (the last Balkan country to do so). The aim should now be for a “mine-free SE Europe.” All of the obligations of the Convention, including the requirement to clear all mines in 10 years, are achievable in this region.

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At what I would call the strategic level, it is unlikely (or unnecessary) that a regional mine action strategy would be developed for SE Europe. However, it would be useful if all of the national strategies or action plans developed by the countries contained common elements. The use of common terminology and standard reporting formats on the Infor­mation Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) developed by the General Cleaner Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHID) would make elaboration of the mine problem more logical, and it would become easier to gauge progress. The development of national standards based on the Interna­tional Mine Action Standards (IMAS) would allow for consistency of operations, as would a common accreditation system for mine action operators in the region. For example, if a mine detection dog (MDD) company or a MRE operator is accredited to work in one country, that accreditation should be recognized in another country if the system is the same.

Operational Level

Montenegro has shown a strong interest in regional cooperation probably exist at the operational level. There is already dialogue between Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro, over the clearance of bordering minefields. Shared use could consist of expensive or high technology equipment. For example, more regular use had been fore­seen for the “Mineseeker” airship after its test in Kosovo, then its cost and work program had been discontinued. Probably the greatest area for cooperation in this level resides with the joint inspections that are now taking place for the Monitoring Group.

Little Hand

That little hand, that busy hand
That played in sand and tossed a stone
That slept beside your weary head
That grasped your father’s hand so tight
As you walked through the loud bazaar,
Leaving only the tears of the child.

On little hand on busy hand!
Do not be afraid of that toy
That looks so strange, just lying there
While only boring reddening stones
Are found among the blasted nuts.

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Remember what your father said
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