Bits and Bytes from Bogota

Dennis Barlow

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)
NOTES FROM THE FIELD

The Americas: Regional Mine Action Seminar in Peru

During a two-day conference in Lima, Peru, participants reaffirmed their collective commitment and dedication to becoming a hemisphere safe from AP mines.

Some of the general topics of the two-day conference included:
1. National planning and priority setting.
2. The general status and operations of the Ottawa Convention in the Americas.
3. National goals and progress made toward these goals.
4. Regional Planning and Priority Setting.
5. Possible methods to reinforce and strengthen the role of the OAS in mine action.
6. Mobilizing political momentum and commitment.
7. The OAS Portfolio as a mechanism for communicating short-term and regional cooperation.
9. Building private/public partnerships in order to sustain resources for mine action.
10. Mainstreaming mine action into national development initiatives.
11. The importance of a National Spokesperson for each country in order to honor the national authorities.

Results in collecting only need-to-know information and will result in a more streamlined methodology for collecting and using information. It is important to maintain a clear understanding of the sources of direct, first-line information. It was observed that often too much information is collected that makes or renders pertinent information unusable. If preparation is made in defining needed information and the best methods for collecting and disseminating it, much work, which might have to be done later, could be eliminated "up front.”

- Identify each agency or organization that has a valid interest in receiving landmine-related information. This will set the stage for productive quick pro quo relationship with the government, with coordinating organizations such as the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It may also create a demand for persistent information, thus insuring its continued support within the government. It can help "shape" the way data is collected and provided to others for the most convenient interface. The sharing of information will also facilitate mainstreaming of mine action activities within the broader context of socio-economic development.

- Utilize many sources of data collection. Information systems can be more reliable when accumulated data is collected from a variety of sources. This not only provides a way to verify data, but can also provide data seen from various perspectives. Key sources of data are local newspaper articles, government agency reports, police and fire department reports, medical and hospital records, local government bodies, service clubs and organizations, schools, etc.

- Provide feedback in sources of data. Sometimes the sources of data will want to use the polished information that results from the raw data. Sometimes data sources would just like to know that their efforts were justified. Therefore, it is important to provide positive and constructive feedback to data sources about the worth and use of the data they provided.

- Create a centralized database that nevertheless depends on and serves decentralized nodes. Most data collection schemes are based on collecting disseminated data and then running that body into a centrally maintained, purified, and managed information system. It is important to identify the various groups (see first two points above) having need of information collected in the centralized system have access to portions of it that can further their goals. It is not necessary that all groups have access to all information, but it is necessary that legislative uses of the information be given a way to gather the information relevant to their missions and goals.

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Over 130 participants from 12 nations took part in spirited discussions and focused work groups that attempted to frame key data collection and victim assistance issues. The ideas that surfaced there and the suggested "next steps" were so insightful that we thought it important to share them through this forum.

Data Collection and Use

Mine-affected countries in Latin America range from those still dealing with newly seeded landmines (e.g., Colombia) to those that are virtually mine-safe (e.g., Costa Rica), therefore one might suspect that there would be very little consensus about the subject of managing mine action related information. In fact, the countries of the region reached agreement on some valuable guidelines relating to this critical subject:

- As a start, identify what information is needed and how it will be used. This will

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Landmine News Around the World

The Wheelchair Foundation Distributed Over 5,000 Wheelchairs in Afghanistan

The Wheelchair Foundation, in association with the U.S. Department of State, has just recently distributed over 5,000 wheelchairs to disabled Afghans, opening a project to help improve the lives of Afghan citizens affected by war. Wheelchair Foundation founder and CEO Kenneth Behring spoke at the opening of Camp Warren and commented on how the event showed the people of Afghanistan that Americans were still concerned about improving the lives of Afghans and giving them hope for a better future after the destruction there during the past years. Many of the recipients were landmine victims who crawled to the event to receive a wheelchair. Other recipients were carried to the event on the backs of family members and friends. Afghan President Abdullah Abdullah told victims that the limbs they have lost due to the Soviet invasion and its successors have been sacrifices for freedom. He also thanked Behring and the Wheelchair Foundation for their work and announced the formation of an official committee to oversee the distribution, training and maintenance of wheelchairs. Since 2000, the Wheelchair Foundation has delivered more than 160,000 wheelchairs in 100 countries to victims of war, disability, and disease. For more information, visit the Wheelchair Foundation website at http://www.wheelchairfoundation.org.

Rats to Help Detect Landmines in Mozambique

Tanzania announced plans to dispatch hundreds of rats trained in mine detection and detonation to landmine-infested Mozambique, following a three-year training program conducted by the Sokcho University of Agriculture (SUA). APOPO, a Belgian research and development project that was created in response to the global landmine problem, started the project in 2000. Christopher Cox, coordinator of APOPO, indicated that field tests were currently being conducted to determine that similar projects planned for the future in Angola, Ethiopia, Bosnia and Cambodia. The Belgian and Finnish governments as well as the European Union and the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHID) have helped to fund the rat training and current project in Tanzania. The training of each rat generally takes approximately six to 10 months, and trained, each rat can cover about 100 sq. m in land in 30 minutes. Genetically Modified Plants as Possible Landmine Detectors

The U.S. and Canadian military forces have been working together to develop genetically modified plants that can sense landmines. The technique has a great deal of potential, since genetically modified crops could be dispersed in areas to ensure that the land is safe. The new detection method could potentially lower the costs associated with landmine detection that are currently being used. However, because plants have already been genetically modified, generally all plants would likely only be helpful for countries where conflicts have ended. The new plants will likely not be ready for use for another five years.

Japan Mine Action Service Wins International Cooperation Prize

In late October, the Japan Mine Action Service (JMAS) was selected as the winner of the Yomiuri Shimbun International Cooperation Prize, which honors organizations or individuals who have made outstanding contributions to international cooperation. JMAS helped clear over 15,000 landmines and UXOs in Cambodia in 2003 alongside members of the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC). The Japanese agreed to assist Cambodia with mine removal as well as mine detection and clearance. Beginning last year, JMAS dispatched landmine experts to Cambodia to begin landmine clearing and to help demonstrate to local personnel within Cambodia how to dispose of the mines and unpicked bombs. Yoshio Doi, a 60-year-old former Self Defense Forces general, created JMAS in September of 2001. JMAS is currently planning to apply for more funding so its personnel can conduct mine removal in a wider scale and increase teams of local military and non-military help to conduct detection and clearance operations in Cambodia. JMAS also sent members to Afghanistan and hopes to continue contact with Danish mine clearance organizations.

Art Reach Program Helps Bosnian Children to Cope With Painful Memories

The ArtReach Foundation, an American nonprofit agency that sends art professionals to war-affected countries to work with teachers and students, recently sent a group of American students and their teacher to Bosnia. The Americans taught the Bosnian students "healing through art" using pen, paper, crayons and other art supplies. The team worked with 32 teachers and 30 students in Travnik, a town located near Srebrenica where thousands of Muslims had been murdered in 1995 by the Bosnian-Serb army. Even eight years after the civil war in Bosnia ended, the killing and the effects of landmines in Srebrenica still haunt the minds of many Bosnian children. The artwork completed by the Bosnian students during the ArtReach program reflected the fear of mine-laden areas by children who included mines in their illustrations. The illustrations by the students of their future depicted the hopes of Bosnian children living in areas free of landmines. The ArtReach Foundation promotes creative and self-expresive educational methods, such as visual and dramatic arts, to those students. One of ArtReach's goals in Bosnia is to develop a program manual for other art therapy teams to use after disaster strikes anywhere in the world.