December 2002

Ending the Tragedy of Landmines Through Innovation and Cooperation

CISR JMU
Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Recommended Citation
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use of a mine-sniffing dog for mine detection, followed by the placement of a yellow flag to mark the presence of a possible landmine. Then the human or manual deminer used a probing device to determine the precise location of the dog’s discovery. Since in this case a mock mine was found (as opposed to a piece of scrap metal), for training, the deminer proceeded to meticulously snip and cut the surrounding grass and vegetation to prepare the ground for the landmine’s later removal.

The process lasted about twenty minutes. Despite the knowledge that this process was being conducted under simulated conditions, within a mock minefield and containing fake landmines, it was not hard to imagine the presence of a real landmine and the accompanying danger associated with its detection and removal. The mood of extreme seriousness and concentration transmitted by the deminer and the observing army personnel reinforced the gravity of this procedure.

A Panoramic View of the Minefield: Its Proximity to Village Life

After this demonstration, we followed the deminers up a hill to gain a panoramic perspective of the minefield.

Several aspects of this perspective joined me. First, this view revealed the enormity of the actual minefield, approximately 600 meters long or about six American football fields, according to Carlos Orozco, the national coordinator for the OAS mine action programs. Mr. Orozco also drew my attention to the numerous yellow flags visible within the minefield. These flags, the same type used to designate the detection of a mock mine in the previous demonstration, represented locations at which actual landmines had been detected. Perhaps 50 or more flags flew within the minefield as a testament to the deadly seriousness of this demining mission.

The second striking aspect to this view was the proximity of shelters and the local village of Mantiguas to the minefield. To these residents, the minefield provided a graphic daily reminder of the consequences of war upon civilians, even after the cessation of hostilities. But the last visual impression from this view was the most powerful: that of three children walking along the road past the yellow caution tape demarcating the presence of the minefield. Apparently, these children were returning home from school, walking along the only path connecting their home to the school in Mantiguas. I was reminded of a photograph I had received from our adopted village in Podvidaz in which schoolchildren were walking in school single file behind an adult. I wondered: “How many thousands of children must walk past skulls and bones and menacing reminders of a war’s deadly residue on a daily basis? How might such daily encounters with danger affect these children? How much of childhood innocence and wonder might these images destroy, to be replaced by feelings of insecurity and suspicion?”

While overlooking the Mantiguas minefield, I asked the demining supervisor about any mine-related accidents that had occurred to the local population. He stated that eight people had been victims of landmines, five of whom had died. Apparently, none of these were children. He also claimed that 50 cattle had been killed while grazing.

As we drove back down the hill toward the minefield, I suddenly noticed a scene and asked my driver to stop the van just off the road, a short distance from the minefield, several dozen cattle lay in the shade of the trees, grazing or lounging silently.

Witness to a Massive Destruction of Landmines

The following day, I was invited by the OAS to witness the destruction of 10,000 landmines from the Nicaraguan national stockpile in accordance with their commitment, as a signatory to the Ottawa Convention or Mine Ban Treaty. The event was attended by numerous dignitaries and representatives from organizations involved with mine action in Nicaragua and presided over by Minister of Defense, Dr. Jose Adan Goerica.

The location in which the detonation was set to occur lay about two miles away from our observation area. Yet all attendees were given earplugs to buffer this view, which was the most powerful: that of the audible impact of the explosions. Five detonation lines extended from five buttons at our observation area to the detonation site. Five people were given the honor of pressing a detonation button. And five massive shredding explosions provided titanic visual and sonic evidence of the simultaneous destruction of thousands of landmines, and of the commitment of Nicaragua to eliminate the threat of landmines from their borders.

Closing Thoughts

The presence of landmines and their impact on mine-affected civilians and communities graphically reveals the destructive consequences of particular peoples and nations to resolve conflict at a given time in their history. Traumatically, with respect to landmines, the cessation of hostilities does not concurrently ensure the cessation of victims of war. All peoples and nations carry an undeniable moral responsibility to work towards reducing, and ultimately eliminating altogether, the causes which produce military conflict, and which in turn lead to the laying of minefields. As humanity strives to achieve this ideal, we must accept the humanitarian responsibility for doing all we can to heal the wounds of innocent civilians produced by war and conflict. And, I believe, we must do all we can to educate humanity about the presence and consequence of landmines and support those organizations, like the OAS, seeking to remove mines and restore dignity and self-worth to landmine survivors.

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Proceedings

Opening the conference, Secretary of State Colin Powell achieved a delicate balance by stressing both mine action’s many successes and the need for more funding and support. Despite “concerted international action over the past decade” to reduce “landmine casualties worldwide from 26,000 per year to approximately 10,000 annually,” Powell emphasized “that millions of deadly landmines still remain buried, waiting to kill.” The challenge of ridding the world of landmines is finite and realizable. The task, however, will require dedication and persistence. Many of the attendees were also quick to point out that the world will probably never be mine-free, making the world safer, however, is a realistic and desirable goal.

Ken Rutherford, the double-amputee co-founder of the Landmine Survivors Network, was on hand for the duration of the conference. His presence and words affirmed the tangible threat of mines and UXOs; for Americans it is easy to perceive the landmine menace as remote. For the millions of individuals living in mine-affected regions, however, the threat is horrifyingly real. Emanuel Alonso, who lost both of his hands in a landmine accident more than 20 years ago, provided living evidence of both human resilience and shocking tragedy. His first pair of protheses lasted 17 years (a typical prosthesis should last no more
than five years, but were eventually replaced by the Polus Center, a small charity that provides prostheses to landmine victims in Nicaragua.

Collin King, an International Landmine and Explosive Ordnance Disposal Consultant, was an articulate and reasonable presence throughout the conference. He pointed out, both formally and informally, that the landmine/UXO situation is a very complex and multidimensional problem. Subsequently, the landmine/UXO situation must be both complex and multi-dimensional. Lloyd Feinberg, the manager of the Leaky War Victims Fund, shared his view: “There are no silver bullets, there are no simple solutions.”

**Networking and Information Exchange**

Many of the mine action attendees used the conference not only to reach out to the interested Rotarians, but also to exchange ideas with each other. Brigadier General Paddy Higden, a Mine Action Operations Expert, urged for increased integration of the various sectors of mine action. Users should be involved in development, and developers should be involved in use. “If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a visit is worth a thousand pictures,” he said.

A large variety of NGOs were on hand to share information, provide advice and converse with each other. From small grassroots-oriented NGOs such as the Cambodia-based Rehab Oriented Surgical Enablement (ROSE) Charities, to large-scale demining programs like Britain’s massive HALO Trust, virtually every aspect of mine action and victim assistance was represented. The Marshall Legacy Institute’s Mine Detection Dog Partnership Program gave a memorable demonstration of a dog in action; one of their enduring canines, Rosa, successfully found a mine hidden in an unidentified box of soil.

Although the ultimate aim of the conference was to harness the Rotarians’ vast expertise and charitable resources, a pleasant side-effect was the interaction of the other organizations present. There were ideas exchanged, partnerships discussed and plans made. On more than one occasion, NGOs found themselves with a common goal and able to form a synergetic relationship. With luck, this conference (and others like it) will bring a more cooperative attitude to the mine action community.

**Rotary Participation**

The Rotarians proved themselves to be knowledgeable and eager participants. Despite the intensity and duration of the proceedings (both days stretched well into the evening), presentations and information were greeted only with interest and respect. Clubs from across the world were represented, many in countries with existing landmine problems.

Frank O’Dea, Director of the Canadian Landmine Foundation, invited the Rotarians to participate in 2002’s Night of 1000 Dinners. This charity event, to be held on December 5th, is an opportunity for individuals around the world to come together and sponsor a dinner to raise money for minefield clearance. O’Dea’s impassioned speech was interrupted by applause on numerous occasions. The Night of 1000 Dinners is coordinated specifically with Rotary International; last year, Rotarians were among the most prolific contributors.

Naturally, many of the various Rotarians present had doubts and concerns about involvement in mine action. Despite the great care taken by the NGOs, the scope and urgency of the worldwide landmine/UXO problem can be daunting. The problem is not localized, homogeneous or benign; it is widespread, varied and severe. In such situations, it is hard to know where to start, or whether it is even worthwhile to contribute. Rotary International’s massive drive to eradicate polo, one of their most successful efforts, was a project with a definite and realistic end-point. Mine action is certainly different. Even the most optimistic expert admits that the world will probably never be mine-free. Furthermore, the radical degree to which the landmine problem varies from place to place makes the solution extremely complex. Nonetheless, the Rotarians’ doubts and concerns were appeased by the knowledge of the experts on hand. In fact, the very difficulty of the problem is what makes Rotary International so appropriate as a mine action partner. Far from mere cash cows, Rotarians are professional, political and academic authorities who have already contributed their knowledge and financial assistance to the cause of mine action.

Some of the Rotarians on hand for the event questioned the State Department’s commitment to humanitarian demining. One such individual was hesitant to lend financial assistance to the cause without the United States formal commitment to the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty. It seems that our government is unwilling to “set an example” for the private sector and for other countries, by
NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Margaret Bus and Colin King discuss the multi-dimensional world of mine action.

than five years), but were eventually replaced by the Palua Centre, a small charity that provides psychosocial services to landmine victims in Nicaragua.

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Conclusion

If the goal was to bring Rotary International into the mine action community in order to innovate and cooperate, then the conference was a massive success. Not only were the Rotarians able to share their ideas and thoughts, but the mine action community was able to meet together on an unprecedented level. The lessons were learned and plans established.

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Published by JMU Alumni Commons, 2002

MASG Update (can't from p.112)

International NGOs have undertaken assessment missions with a view to participating in the expanding national mine action programme.

Yemen

With significant material assistance from the US Government and the sudden backing of key donors, the Yemen Mine Action Programme has doubled in size since 2000, and the aims of the first Five-Year Strategy are expected to be achieved ahead of schedule.

Significant improvements are being made in the care of mine survivors and the early removal of previously-deployed mines and the destruction of existing stockpiles. During the conference's closing ceremonies, Dennis Barlow, Director of the MAIC, reiterated that the worldwide landmine crisis is "not a policy issue," but instead is a pressing "humanitarian issue."

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Rotarians, however, must be careful to learn as much about the various NGOs as they possibly can. Successful advocacy must come from both a grassroots "ground-up" movement and an administrative "top-down" campaign. Together with the U.S. Department of State and many dedicated humanitarian organizations, Rotary International can make an immediate and sustained impact on the effort to make the world mine-safe. This conference ultimately exceeded every the most hopeful of expectations; the first step towards innovation and cooperation of various mine action sectors has been taken, and it was a giant leap.

MASG Scholarly Commons, 2002