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Recommended Citation
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Demining in Ethiopia: A Demanding Task

Mines and UXO are an ever-present danger for people and their livestock in many parts of Ethiopia, which has been ravaged by years of conflict and war. The Ethiopian Mine Action Office (EMAO) is the focal point of Humanitarian mine action in Ethiopia and therefore in charge of locating and destroying the cruel and hidden killers. A demining program under its auspices began in May 2002 with clearance work in the priority areas of northern Tigray.

by Josef Strebel, Mine Action Advisory Team, Information Advisor to EMAO

Introduction

The topography of Ethiopia, the remoteness and inaccessibility of some of the areas where mines have been laid, and the lack of roads and other infrastructure is a major obstacle to the demining program. Another major impediment is the nature of the conflicts and the way they were carried out. Often, the conflict parties did not produce maps or sketches of the areas where mines were laid. For the last war, the Ethiopian government handed over all minefield-related information to United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) for their area of responsibility.

The sheer size of the country and the many conflicts it has experienced in modern times make a through humanitarian demining effort a huge task that requires extensive information gathering. The search for mines is painstaking, requiring patience and time. Time that nobody really has in view of the destruction and pain that these lethal weapons produce, the rehabilitation programmes that are hampered and the delay of the return of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

EMAO's Mission

- To develop a sustainable national mine action capacity
- To alleviate human suffering caused by landmines/UXO
- To facilitate relief and developmental activities in support of IDPs and the repatriation of deportees
- To facilitate a conducive environment for resuming normal social and economic activities in areas currently affected by landmines and UXO

The extent of the mine problem will be assessed through an overall Ethiopian Landmine Impact Survey (ELIS), for which the appropriate methodology is currently being evaluated and the best approaches are being studied. The Survey Action Center (SAC) gave the non-governmental organization (NGO) Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) the task of carrying out the necessary surveys. So far, there is only very limited data available, which was gathered in northern Tigray and Afar by the Ethiopian Demining Project (EDP) and Ethiopian NGO Rehabilitation and Development Organization (RoDo) during its ongoing Mine Risk Education (MRE) efforts. Only limited losses of incidents or incidents/impacts or maps or sketches of minefields exist.

Additionally, information can be gathered through questioning administrators and the population in areas where minefields are likely to be expected. Unfortunately, one of the best indicators for the presence of mines are accidents or, in the technical jargon of humanitarian mine action, incidents. Tampering with mines is a major cause of injuries and deaths in Northern Tigray and Afar in the aftermath of the war.

A preliminary survey to ELIS recently conducted by EMAO and NPA in Babir Dar and North Wollo region, north of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, also revealed that victims have been injured or killed by removing a metal ring, the size of a finger ring from an unknown object. These objects were almost certainly live hand grenades left behind from the civil war. How many other areas are threatened through mines/UXO is unclear to date and will be learned through the ELIS with the necessary details to plan action and allocate the restricted resources of EMAO.

National Capacity Development

On December 5, 2000, the government of Ethiopia dedicated from a World Bank loan for an Emergency Recovery Program (ERP) a slice of $30 million (U.S.) for humanitarian mine action.

The Ethiopian Mine Action Office (EMAO) was established in February 2001 and began to develop field capacity and a management center by July 2001. The same month, the Director and Deputy Director were appointed and the Director participated in a senior mine action managers training program at Cranfield University in the United Kingdom.

In September 2001, UNDP finalized the comprehensive project document ETH/01/001 using core United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) funds together with Dutch and Norwegian cost-sharing contributions, which outlined and partially funded the mine action requirements through 2002.

Two companies of the Ethiopian Army were deployed and transferred to EMAO for training as deminers. In January 2002, EMAO's management signed the first contract with the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED) so that it could begin with humanitarian mine action in Ethiopia. By mid-March 2002, the two companies were fully equipped and then deployed to the priority areas in northern Tigray, where they set up camp and established communications.

Currently, the field capacity includes two companies of 200 men in total. They have been trained up to international standards by technical advisors from RONCO and with the financial support of the U.S. State Department. Right now, EMAO Headquarters is in phase two of filling its ranks with junior staff and will be at full strength this summer. A second two companies of 200 total manual devices trained to International Standards with the assistance of the U.S. State Department. General surveys were conducted in two priority areas where Technical Survey and Clearance started in mid-May 2002.

This capacity is a start but it is not the total solution to solve the landmine problem in the country. EMAO is conscious of the extent of the landmine threat in the country, and we know to address the entire mine action needs of Ethiopia.

As of now, mine action in Ethiopia sits at important crossroads. EMAO's ranks are filled with trained staff. Mechanizations for covering extensive minefields offering centers have been developed, and the government has committed funds. Additionally, international advisors are in place and draft clearing plans and the development of long-term national mine action strategies are under way. Now that we, the Ethiopians, have demonstrated the necessary resolve to undertake humanitarian mine action at international
EMAO’s Achievements to Date

- Nov. 2001: Dangerous area survey of Tigray and Afar regions
- Feb. 2001: EMAO Headquarters established
- June 2001: Two demining companies trained by RONCO and demobilized
- June 2001: Mine Action Database set up
- July 2001: EMAO Director & Deputy Director assigned
- Sep. 2001: Terms of Reference submitted & approved by the Prime Minister
- Sep. 2001: Protocols signed with UNDP
- Jan. 2002: Contracts signed with MoFED & Ethiopian Recovery Program Management Unit
- Feb. 2002: General survey in Tigray started
- Mar. 2002: Demining, transport and office materials purchased
- May 2002: Two demining companies deployed to priority areas
- Mar. 2002: Mine action awareness programme in Tigray and Afar regions

Training of two additional manual demining companies

If additional manual demining assets are not trained and deployed, the initial two companies of manual deminers will be overwhelmed by the scale of necessary activities, even in the priority areas. Two manual demining companies are planned to be trained during July 2002. UNDP is providing the trainers to deliver the training. The cost for the equipment and vehicles for these two companies, however, is yet to be realized. The recruiting of the deminers will happen during June, and training will start in July 2002.

Structure of Mine Risk Education

In order to educate the local people about the continued danger of landmines and UXO and to reduce the number of landmine and UXO accidents among the affected population, various projects of community awareness will be implemented by EMAO. Community awareness activities will utilize a variety of techniques, including TV and radio broadcasts, presentations to school and community groups, and the widespread distribution of mine awareness materials (i.e., posters, T-shirts, school materials, etc.). Wherever possible, community awareness will be directly linked to demining activities.

The Rapid Response Teams (RRTs), based in the seven mine-affected areas (districts), will also contain an MAE capacity that is to conduct a community mine awareness programme in their areas of responsibility. The RRTs will be established as soon as possible and will be trained before deployment.

Establishing RRTs

The landmine-contaminated area in the Tigray and Afar regions covers hundreds of square kilometers, and utilizing only the initial manual demining capacity of 200 men would create enormous delays for dependant rehabilitation work. Many IDPs have already moved back to locations within the contaminated areas. To support these people, the need of RRTs is very urgent.

To address the immediate need of communicating the danger of mines to the local population, to remove any immediate threat and to mark the current threat, RRTs should be established and trained as soon as possible. It is suggested that these Rapid Response Teams are allocated to the contaminated areas (districts) where they can respond on short notice and also conduct their functions within the community. In general, these RRTs will allow the larger manual demining units to concentrate on known larger contaminated areas, maximizing their economy of scale. The RRTs also allow the local authorities to have additional assets within their administrative regions that can respond to immediate threats from constituents.

The RRTs are also to be expanded to the other contaminated areas of Ethiopia to ensure assistance to the whole population. The immediate requirement is for seven teams.

Establishing a MDD Capacity

Mine dog detection has rapidly become the second most common mine clearance approach in the world, and each day, more than 25 organizations worldwide use mine dogs.

While dogs cannot replace manual mine clearing, they are powerful tools when used in combination with manual and mechanical clearance and can often have a large potential within humanization demining operations.

It is recommended that MDD are implemented in Ethiopia through a two-stage approach, as follows:

Stage 1: Obtain an immediate MDD capacity of six MDD teams (two dogs per team) and also to train the first twelve Ethiopian dog handlers.

Stage 2: Develop a national MDD capacity by developing an MDD training center for the training of new dogs and handlers.

Landmine situation in Ethiopia is a result of:

- The war during the Italian Invasion (1935-1978)
- The Ogaden war between Ethiopia & Somalia (1977-1978)
- The border war with Sudan (1980)
- The Civil War (1975-1991)
- The current conflict with Eritrea (1998-2000) mines and UXO are a threat:
  - High risk to be killed or maimed
  - Restricted access to neighbors, water, food, agricultural land
  - IDPs/Deportees can’t go back
  - High risk to loose livestock
  - Rehabilitation and reconstruction work can’t stop

About 33 different kinds of mines have been found so far.

EMAO’s Challenges

- To deal with the mine/UXO threat in time despite the limited resources available
- To meet the International Mine Action Standards through proper training and supervision
- To gather reliable data of the mine/UXO problem for planning and prioritizing
- To liaise and cooperate with all national and regional stakeholders

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