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UNMEE MACC's Four Years: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

by Andrea E. Poelling [UNMEE MACC]

The 30-year struggle between Ethiopia and Eritrea (1961–1991), as well as the border conflict between the two countries (1998–2000), left a legacy of serious mine and UXO contamination throughout much of Eritrea. The problem was not seriously addressed until four years ago with the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000.¹ This peace process rapidly opened the doors for a number of interested mine action players—including the United Nations, as well as international mine action non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—to enter the arena and tackle the landmine problem of Eritrea. Prior to this moment, there was only a modest national capacity in place to deal with the contamination throughout the country.²

U.N. Resolution 1320

With the arrival of the U.N. Peace Keeping Force and the founding of the U.N. Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), the Mine Action

Coordination Center's (MACC's) mine action programme began. The programme received its mandate from Security Council Resolution 1320, and two subsequent resolutions.³ Resolution 1320 ordains the MACC to “coordinate and provide technical assistance for humanitarian mine action activities in the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ)⁴ and area adjacent to it.” Resolution 1320 seems, at first sight, to have been relevant to the circumstances prevailing at the time. Aside from numerous casualties, the 1998–2000 border conflict resulted in countless displaced persons, many from the TSZ. There was a humanitarian disaster, which called for a humanitarian response. The MACC, together with other mine action players, responded after receiving a direct request from the government of Eritrea for assistance. Indeed, Resolution 1320 opened the door for the MACC to get involved in humanitarian mine action in terms of coordination, and provision of technical assistance.

At the end of 2000, the UNMEE MACC entered a relatively empty playing field, together with an influx of several other international

humanitarian mine action NGOs.⁵ All incoming players immediately recognized the mine action needs of the country. But, with the arrival of so many interested mine action agents on the scene, it quickly became apparent that there was a lack of capacity in place for coordination, oversight and monitoring of mine action activities. There was also a virtual absence of national mine action planning. The situation was complex and somewhat chaotic.

UNMEE MACC Takes the Lead

Setting up the rules and regulations for coordinating mine action in the country, which was only just emerging from a recent conflict, was not as simple as it may at first have been suspected.

A dog handler and his mine detection dog search for mines.



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However, in view of the MACC's mandated coordination function in the TSZ and in view of the fact that there was no strong national mine action agency capable of coordination, the UNMEE MACC took on a lead role in attempting to coordinate mine action activities and assisting the national authorities in establishing some firm national mine action structures. This pro-

professional development of 13 national instructors. The MACC also conducted numerous mine action-related courses at the NTC for representatives of all mine action agencies in Eritrea, but primarily for staff from the national mine action NGO.

Even though there was no formal written agreement signed between UNMEE and the gov-

events threw the mine action activities in Eritrea into disarray, upsetting many international mine action players, as well as mine action donors. But the MACC remained calm, and with the same steadfast and eager approach that the MACC applied to the country-specific situation in late 2000, the MACC again confronted these unexpected national events in mid-2002. What could have been a devastating blow to the MACC programme and operations was turned into a success story.

In July 2002, the government of Eritrea issued Proclamation 123,⁶ which established a national Eritrean Demining Authority (EDA). This proclamation simultaneously nullified all previously existing national mine action structures, including EMAP. About a month later, the government also announced the expulsion of all international mine action NGOs,⁷ accusing them of being "all over the place," among many other grievances. In spite of noteworthy progress in local mine action capacity-building by the MACC during the first two years of the mission, the establishment of the EDA amounted to a virtual denial of achievements in this area. The proclamation thoroughly affected the operations of the MACC but left the door open for the

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to start a mine action capacity-building programme anew, now under different circumstances and separate from the MACC. The situation also affected the impressions of donors, who immediately withdrew their funding support from the country, with noticeable exceptions of the Dutch and the European Union (EU). The mine action situation for Eritrea was no longer a pretty picture.

The Challenge

The MACC had no other choice but to accept the proclamation and its consequences. After all, the mistake had been made: the UNMEE MACC had not signed any kind of official document prior to its mine action capacity building and coordination involvement with the national authorities that officially stipulated its role and responsibilities. There was nothing to fall back on. The MACC's effort to reach beyond the vagueness of its security council mandate appeared laudable and rational at the time; however, it now came back to haunt the MACC. A lesson was learned: "activities of a mine action centre resulting from a security council resolution should be defined in **clear** terms of reference that can then be made the subject of an overarching



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANDREA E. POELLING

Another deadly mine disposed.

active stance quickly led to concrete results within only 12 months.

Indeed, in 2001, mine action in Eritrea made substantial headway. A year of intense operational and capacity-building activity was well under way. The MACC offered the Eritrean Mine Action Programme (EMAP) accommodation on the premises of the MACC, with the aim of trying to build a bridge to the government staff of EMAP, a fledgling government agency. The MACC established the in-country Technical Safety Standards for Eritrea and worked with EMAP to establish accreditation and licensing procedures for all operators working in mine action. The Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) was installed—an important achievement. The database was able to produce landmine/UXO area maps, which were provided to all organizations and agencies working in the TSZ. Formally authorized in writing by EMAP, the MACC also implemented a quality control and quality assurance system that allowed monitoring of clearance operations in the TSZ. Much effort was also spent renovating and upgrading the National Training Centre (NTC) with a generous contribution from the German government. The MACC provided instructor support to the NTC, including the training and

ernment of Eritrea suggesting that mine action coordination should proceed in this manner, informally, the majority of the mine action players in-country went along with the plan of action and accepted the coordination function the MACC had assumed. The MACC was prepared to step outside of its U.N. mandate, since its activities resulting from the Security Council Resolution 1320 were only vaguely defined. Also, the MACC activities in support of the national mine action programme were undertaken in response to a direct verbal request by the Eritrean authorities for mine action assistance.

By the beginning of 2002, it appeared that mine action support to Eritrea was well-solidified. Mine action operations were occurring on a scale never seen before in Eritrea. The donors greatly welcomed the advancement and generously supported the various Eritrean mine action programmes. The MACC was pleased with its achievements and was keen on moving forward since it was evident much remained to be done.

New Mine Action Proclamation

In mid-2002, the MACC was faced with an unprecedented situation, which taught it and the rest of the U.N. mine action community an unparalleled lesson. Unanticipated national