Humanitarian vs. Military Mine Action

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Humanitarian vs. Military

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and commercial companies are well-known in the mine action community for conducting demining operations all over the world. But there is another breed of deminer that is becoming more and more common—the military. Militaries often have different objectives, tactics, opinions and experiences from professional mine action practitioners, which is frequently reflected in the way they conduct clearance operations. Can two groups so different find some common ground and work towards a world in which they not only coexist, but actually work in tandem to assist one another in carrying out our demining?

What Role Should the Military Play?

One contentious topic of debate is whether or not militaries should even be involved in mine action and if so, what exactly their role should be. Because the level of military involvement in mine action currently varies widely from region to region, there are many different views on the subject. There are those that believe their role should be limited, like Hugh Morris of MineTech International, who says, “I don’t think the military have a role in mine action other than in a conflict situation where they cannot be part of any community [organizations] or NGOs. I think the military have a role to secure their own force protection aims, be able to allow movement of their forces and maybe movement of civilians and movement of refugees. But when it is a post-conflict situation, the military should move on to other tasks, because they’re not civil administra tors and they’re not geared to do tasks of a humanitarian mine clearing nature. It requires a lot of men and a lot of time, and I don’t believe any military has the time to do it. So I don’t think they have a role in a post-conflict situation in any country in the world to clear landmines.” He stresses that although the military, being paid for by the government, may be able to do such tasks for less money, if they are not properly trained and knowledgeable on international standards, then they will not be as effective as commercial or non-governmental organizations.

Morris says, “The military have nothing but a military role in clearing mines, and then your NGOs and commercial companies are the ones who will step up in a post-conflict situation, unless there is money put into the military, and they’ll have to adhere to the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS),”

Chuck Meadows of PeaceTrees Vietnam believes that the military should be more involved in the actual clearance of landmines. “In my opinion, if any military is in any mine action, their role should be in the removal of any mines... that they may have used or put down in any conflict that they have been engaged in. Then, in their own countries, I think they would be appropriate ones to assist in the removal of any landmines that any insurgents, rebels or terrorists, or anybody else have in fact put in the general...” John Wilkinson of Rongco also sees the role of the military as one of involvement in clearance, but in addition he emphasizes that their involvement in this aspect of mine action is more appropriate than in other aspects such as mine risk education (MRE). “I think that the mine action in terms of the removal of the mines as opposed to MRE is probably more a role for the military to play.”

Another view is that the military should mainly be involved in the “behind-the-scenes” of mine action, such as providing training, equipment, logistics and planning. Paddy Blagden, an independent consultant of International Mine Action believes this to be best type of involvement in mine action for the military. “There’s so much that the military can do to help the NGOs even without getting near a minefield, and that I’d be far more happy with, because I don’t like seeing soldiers being pushed into doing mine clearance because it’s part of their military duty.”

Collaborators or Competitors?

With the military working in many areas alongside non-military mine action practitioners, one might wonder if they see one another as collaborators or competitors. The overall feeling in the mine action community seems to be that the military is not in competition with NGOs and commercial organizations. One reason for this cited by a number of non-military mine action practitioners is that NGOs and commercial companies often hire ex-military in any mine action work. John Wilkinson sums it up as follows: “...many of our [military and non-military] clients hire that expertise, and we hire that expertise, and everybody else hires are for military, especially to run our field operations. So I’ve never thought that there was a sort of hard and fast division between the two.”

I think there’s different areas of interest, different areas of access, different areas of understanding, but all of them can be bridged and can be made to work in a complementary manner. Some non-military mine action workers (the particular cases in which their organizations are working with the military) have found it hard to work with the military in a harmonious way. As an example of how the two can work hand-in-hand Paddy Blagden tells a story of a Japanese NGO working in Thailand: “...I’ve never thought that there was a sort of hard and fast division between [the military and NGOs]; I think there’s different areas of interest, different areas of access, different areas of understanding, but all of them can be bridged and can be made to work in a complementary manner.”

Alongside one of the Thailand Mine Action Center’s (TMAC) Humanitarian Action (TMHUA), which are composed of members of the Thai army. The HMUFA was often unable to use its machines, so the NGO would borrow them, making sure that when the machines were returned, the HMUFA could carry on its work with a fully funded and serviced machine. Thus, the NGO’s deminers could use a piece of equipment too expensive for them to own for only the cost of fuel and servicing. “And this synergistic relationship worked—we got enormous assistance from the army as a result,” Blagden says.

John Wilkinson says that when Rongco first began working with the U.S. military in Afghanistan, they weren’t sure how to work together, partly because the military didn’t really understand the process of demining and its value. It didn’t take long, though, as he explains: "[A]s soon as we started working, they understood the value of demining, when we started finding unexploded ordnance and landmines that had been missed by the more cursory ‘mine-clearing’ techniques." But this progress was all but lost when that unit’s rotation ended, and Rongco had to start over with the incoming unit. Soon, however, RONGCO’s value was recognized. “[By the time the third unit came in, our presence had been established sufficiently long, and there was enough history of what we’d be clearing and so that the effect that the unit usually immediately said, ‘We want you guys to stay, we want you to continue doing what you’re doing.’...[They understood] the role that we were playing for them even though we were not of them.”

What Does the Military Bring to the Table?

So what advantage, if any, is there in having the military involved in mine action? As in the example of Thailand mentioned above, the military can bring their special knowledge. In short, they have access to a different range of equipment that is too expensive for NGOs themselves to purchase. As John Wilkinson points out, “they have much larger resources; they have the trained EOD [explosive ordnance disposal] people.” If militaries and non-military organizations can work out ways to share these tools, as in the TMAC example, such a partnership can be mutually beneficial to both.

Military also may have some more figurative "tools" from which non-military originations could benefit. According to Chuck Meadows, "the biggest tool they would have is just experience and training, because in the militaries that I’ve been associated with, part of that organization are EOD folks and engineers that are trained to do that, whereas an NGO by ourselves might not have that personal experience."

On the other hand, John Wilkinson says, "That’s not an organizational concept that they have to bring rather than experience... They’ve got a hierarchical system in the military, which, when it is given a mission or undertakes a mission, will turn to and put a lot of resources against and focus its attention on it. I think that organizational structure is something that we in the NGO community could benefit from in terms of how we approach things... So I think that even though they have to bring is the organizational approach and the way they focus logistics and effort on a particular task.”

Facing the Challenges

Though militaries can be a valuable resource if you use their assets to mount collaborative efforts with non-military groups, there are still a number of challenges when involving the military in mine action. One of the major issues is the conflicts and prejudices that each group has towards the other. Hugh Morris notes that "...soldiers more often than not consider civilians to be a necessary evil and are uncomfortable in their presence." Also, even though non-military organizations may have more expertise in humanitarian roles, soldiers may resist learning from civilians. As a former military member himself, Paddy Blagden understands this attitude... "I can tell you as an ex-military that no military man likes to learn from civilians... The last thing you want is a tree-hugging cartoon soldier telling you how to do your business." However, he thinks the military men would do well to overcome their unwillingness to learn from civilians, because "I think they would learn quite a lot... I think that if they can overcome this unwillingness by realizing that they will save lives if they learn from people who are mine clearing the whole time in professionals, then I think I’d help enormously. If they won’t, then I think that’s difficult to learn the ways that we did (i.e., by making a large number of mistakes), but that is a very painful process, and quite a lot of people can directly suffer as a result." On the other hand, as Mr. Wilkinson articulates, non-military organizations can be just as guilty of such prejudice: "[It] requires a change of attitude and a change of understanding on the part of the military. It also in some ways requires a change in attitude on the part of the NGOs—some NGOs prefer not to deal with the military. Well, the
way things are going in terms of military presence, military interests, possibly even the destruction of large chunks of our environment. This makes me very sad."

Paddy Blagan agrees: "I think a lot of NGOs don't like the military..."

The next page of the document continues with the discussion on the relationship between the military and NGOs. It highlights the need for improved military/non-military cooperation and the importance of integrating the military's work with that of humanitarian organizations. The text emphasizes the role of military and commercial groups in providing for victims of armed conflict, while also recognizing the challenges and complexities involved in such cooperation.

Overall, the document discusses the need for a more balanced approach to the role of the military in international affairs, advocating for greater collaboration and understanding between military and humanitarian organizations to address the humanitarian needs of affected populations more effectively.

The text also touches upon the challenges faced by NGOs in working with the military, particularly in regards to the perception of NGOs as 'soft targets' and the difficulties in accessing military personnel and information. It suggests the need for clearer guidelines and a more structured approach to facilitate effective cooperation.

In conclusion, the document highlights the importance of improving the relationship between the military and NGOs, advocating for a more transparent and collaborative approach to address the challenges posed by armed conflict and the resulting humanitarian crises. The text underscores the need for continued dialogue and engagement to foster a more positive and constructive relationship between these two sectors.
mine action response in the mission area.

MACC/ FMAC Assets
The MACC/FMAC manages and coordinates a full fleet of PKF demining assets. These assets currently include a Kenyan Engineering Company, which consists of two humanitarian-trained manual demining teams, a Mine Clearing and Demining Company, which is made up of both a manual and a mechanical demining capacity; and a Bangladeshi demining company, which consists of manual deminers as well as a mine detection dog (MDD) team. In addition, the MACC employs MECHEM, a South African civil contractor, for road clearance operations, as well as for Emergency EOD field teams and two MRE field teams.

The primary role and responsibility of the Force demining assets is to support the mobility and safety of the PKF as well as to provide specialist operational capability. Once demarcation commences, the main focus of work for the Force demining assets will be the clearance of roads and access routes to pillar sites as well as clearance of the actual pillar sites along the delineated border between the two countries. Current preparations for demining in support of demarcation intend to deploy the Force demining assets in the next operation stage, where all assets work alongside each other in a mutually supportive manner.

MACC Management and Coordination
All mine action tasks carried out by the Force demining assets are closely planned and coordinated and supervised by the UNMEE MACC/FMAC. An experienced set of both civilian and military staff members of the MACC/FMAC is responsible for the reception of tasking requests, issuance of tasking orders, monitoring of tasks, implementation of quality assurance as well as supervision of activities in completion of task orders.

The operations section of the MACC works alongside the FMAC. Three Liaison Officers (one from each demining contingent) work at the FMAC. They are in charge of directly liaising and coordinating tasks that are issued by the MACC operations section. These officers report to the civilian Operations Officer of the MACC, who is responsible for the coordination of the assets and tasking priorities.

In addition, there are military officers working at the MACC/FMAC. These officers are in fact UN Military Observers (UNMOs) seconded to the MACC for specific assignments. For example, two UNMOs are active as FMAC MRE Officers: one acts as the Project Officer Demining for Demarcation; one acts as the Field Mine Action Liaison Officer; and one acts as the Mine Action Liaison Officer in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In total, there are currently five UNMOs seconded to the MACC in tasks from Major to Lieutenant Colonel.

The civilian international staff of the MACC are predominantly ex-military staff from a variety of countries. The majority of them have considerable demining and operational management experience. At the MACC, they fill positions such as Programme Manager, Chief of Operations, Operations Officer, Regional Liaison Officers, EOD Officers, Chief of Information, Logistics Officer and Programme/Training Officer. As a team, they are responsible for the smooth functioning of the UNMEE MACC.

Demining Statistics
Since its inception, the MACC has coordinated, managed or supervised the following clearance operations:
- Clearance of 1,058,794 sq m of land
- Clearance of 9,277 km² of roads
- Disposal of 3,375 AF mines
- Destruction of 2,516 AT mines and 48,256 items of UXO

These figures are the results of a combined military and civilian composite of demining operations since the beginning of the MACC through January 2004. They are a reflection of the commitment and cooperation to demining operations across the mission area—an achievement that has been realised through joint efforts among contributing local authorities, NGOs and Force demining assets.

Conclusion
The integration of a MACC into a peacekeeping operation has witnessed a successful management of assets coupled with a unique skills base. This is the first time in UN peacekeeping history that a demining mission has effectively incorporated into the establishment of the mission structure an integrated civilian and military mine action headquarters. This unprecedented achievement has been accomplished by the Mine Action components of a UN peacekeeping mission within a single hierarchical structure. The UNMEE MACC has the potential to serve as a template for the creation of future mine action centres that are part of UN peacekeeping operations where a mine action element is required.

*Photos cited in the text.

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For the needs and goals of the other. As John Wilkinson points out, “... it’s the same thing, but different sides of the same coin,” and getting these two sides to work in concert with one another is key to the progress of humanitarian demining and will undoubtedly benefit both as they work towards the mutual objective of a worldwide safe world from mines and UXO.

Biographical Information
High Morris attended Sandhurst Military Academy and completed 10 years of military service in the British army where he retired as a Captain. He then joined MineTech International, where he was the Operations Manager, managing various contracts around the world (Russia, Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Kuwait, Somalia, Ethiopia, Afghanistan), many of which involved working alongside different militaries. For the past four years, he has been the Operations Director of MineTech International.

Chuck Meadows is a retired U.S. Marine Corps Colonel with 26 years of active service. His organization, PeaceTrees Vietnam, has been operating in cooperation with the Vietnamese army engineers for the past seven years.

John Wilkinson spent 34 years in the U.S. Air Force (11 active duty and 22 in the Reserves), and concurrently with his time in the Reserves, 23 years as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USID). Mr. Wilkinson has been RONCO’s Vice President of Operations since October, 2001, following six years with both the Air Force and USAID. RONCO has been demining with and for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan since early 2002. They also have extensive experience working with military organizations in places such as Iraq, Kuwait and the Central Asian Republic.

Paddy Railgan spent 34 years in the British military, and has worked in mine clearance since 1991. He has managed the demining activities of a number of agencies, most recently when advising a Japanese NGO (JHDSI) in Thailand, where the organization worked alongside the Thai army’s Humanitarian Mine Action Units.

Endnotes

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