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Mine Action in Myanmar

In two Myanmar states, Danish Demining Group and Danish Refugee Council recently conducted a landmine victims survey that helped to document the epidemiology of landmine accidents and the situation of landmine victims more efficiently as well as recommend improved services to landmine survivors and persons with disabilities.

by Roger Fath and Pascal Simon [Danish Demining Group]

Due to several protracted armed conflicts that started immediately after independence in 1948, Myanmar is perceived as one of the most mine-affected countries in the world. Landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) contamination is the result of decades of conflict between the Myanmar Armed Forces (also commonly called *Tatmadaw*) and numerous, armed nonstate actors (NSA) affiliated with the ethnic minorities. Myanmar is not a state party to the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction* (APMBC). Recent progress observed in the negotiations of a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and the coming of legislative elections at the end of 2015 should significantly change the political landscape, and will hopefully facilitate the conduct of more robust humanitarian mine action activities in the country.¹

Mine Action in Myanmar

In 2012, the Myanmar Mine Action Center (MMAC) was established within the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC). During spring 2013, MMAC took leadership of drafting national mine action standards with support of international mine action organizations present in the country. However, once the national standards were completed, MPC focused on taking part in the negotiation of the NCA and stated that signing the agreement was a precondition for marking, survey and clearance operations.

The two mine action pillars that can effectively be implemented in Myanmar at this stage are victim assistance and mine risk education (MRE). The Department of Social Welfare in the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement set up a Mine Risk Education Working

Group in April 2012, bringing together government departments, U.N. agencies in Myanmar, and national and international organizations conducting MRE and victim assistance in country.

Landmine/ERW contamination is confirmed in approximately 50 townships (from a total of 325 townships in the country) in 10 states and regions.² Suspected hazardous areas were identified mostly along borders with Bangladesh, China and Thailand as well as in Bago East in southern central Myanmar.

In January and February 2015, Danish Demining Group/Danish Refugee Council (DDG/DRC) conducted a Landmine and Explosive Remnants of War Victims Survey in the Kachin and Kayah states of Myanmar. Survey objectives were to document victims' conditions, and collect quantitative and qualitative data on opportunities for the reintegration of landmine/ERW victims in those particular states in order to better tailor and deliver future interventions.

Lack of Victim Information System in Myanmar

The research reviewed and analyzed information provided from DDG/DRC's landmine-accident and victim database, which covers the Kachin, North Shan and Kayah states where the organizations are implementing MRE and victim assistance, as well as from the draft Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practice (KAP) survey report and the draft Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) report recently conducted in north and southeast Myanmar.³ Field visits were conducted in Kachin and Kayah to interview landmine survivors and their families as well as to meet representatives from official and nongovernmental institutions and organizations providing services to landmine victims and persons with disabilities.

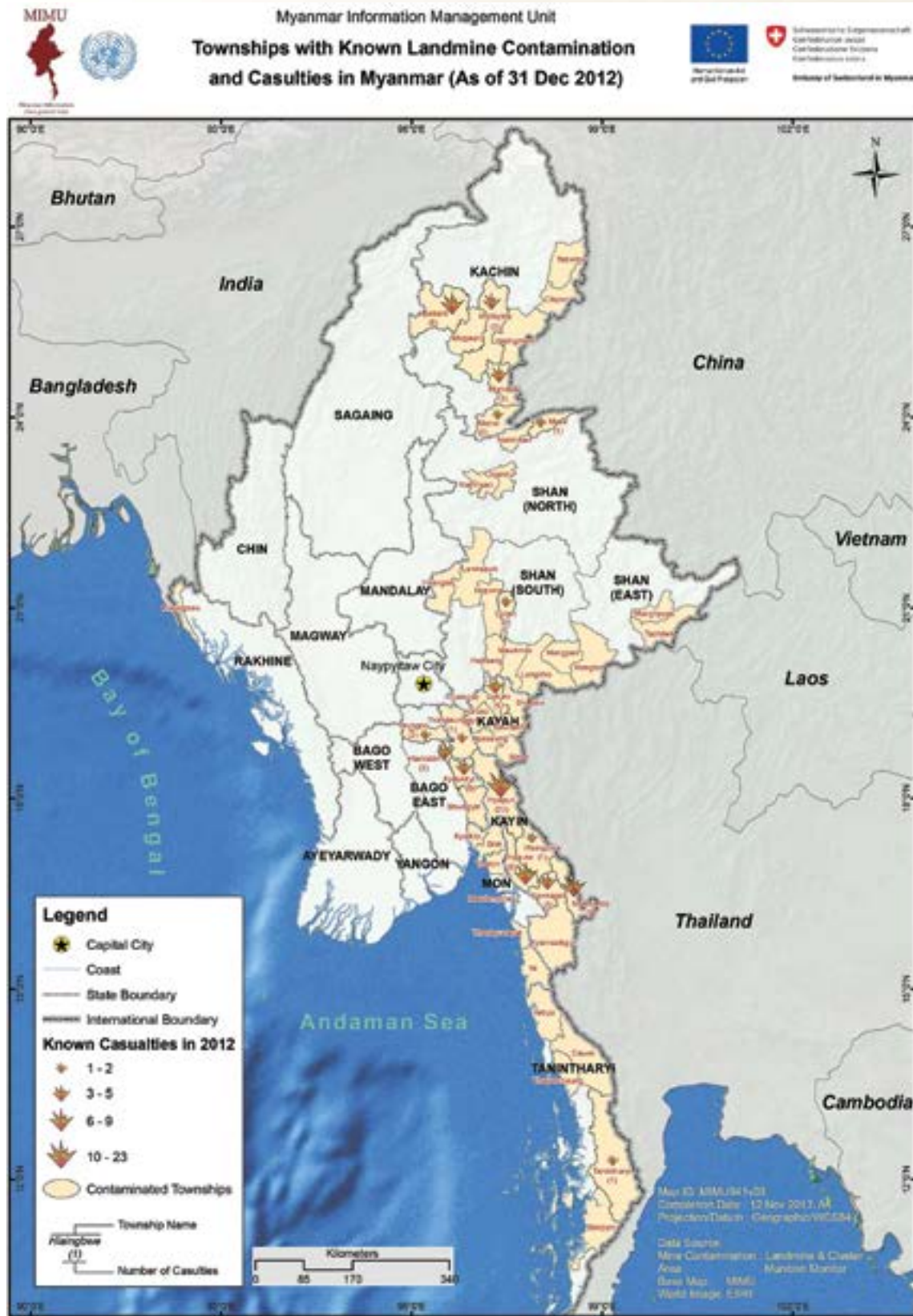


Figure 1. Townships in Burma affected by landmines.
 Figure courtesy of Myanmar Information Management Unit.



Landmines believed to have been used in Myanmar.
Photo courtesy of Peace Myanmar Aid.

The study managed several complications and limitations, the most important being the absence of a systematic and organized victim information system (VIS) in Myanmar. Information collection has been sporadic and inconsistent throughout the country, and providing reliable figures on the impact that landmines have on society is impossible. Due to the continuation of armed hostilities between national armed forces and some of the NSA groups, mine action is still a very sensitive issue, and information about victims remains touchy. The absence of a victim-surveillance mechanism is detrimental to the assessment of the contamination and the accurate documentation of its humanitarian consequences. This unavailability also hinders the planning and implementation of victim assistance programs that could provide the required support to survivors and their families.

The 2014 *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor* reported a total of 3,450 landmines and ERW victims in Myanmar since 1999.² However, mine action professionals in Myanmar believe this figure is underestimated and that a high number of accidents are not reported. The *Monitor* estimates that landmine/ERW victims exceed 40,000, with annual casualties around 1,500 to 2,000; however, no concrete data can support this assumption.²

The recent RNA and KAP surveys provide useful information about landmine survivors as well as for the mine action sector in general. The main findings are consistent with those of the DDG/DRC research and will provide important data for MRE activities. The most relevant findings from these projects indicate the following:

- Landmines continue to be a sensitive issue in the country. Landmines are still associated with security, ceasefire, conflict, protection and military issues.

- Contaminated areas have a low level of warning signs and villagers generally do not mark when they identify a dangerous area.
- As often observed in mine-affected countries, landmines/ERW are not the most important problem encountered by villagers, but a large proportion of respondents still declare that landmines/ERW represent a problem in their daily life.

A report published by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) indicated that 44 percent of prostheses delivered in 2013 in Hpa-An and Yen-an Thar rehabilitation centers were delivered to ERW victims (761 prostheses out of a total of 1,741 amputees) which seems to indicate a strong proportion of landmine/ERW survivors among persons with disabilities in need of prostheses.⁴ In 2014, this proportion was even higher (49 percent), as a total of 502 prostheses were delivered to landmine/ERW survivors out of a total of 1,027 amputees. Interviews with ICRC personnel in charge of the physical rehabilitation program suggest that the proportion of war amputees and landmine survivors should probably reach 60 percent of all patients receiving a prosthesis in Hpa-An and 40 percent in Yen-an Thar Hospital. Survivors represent a very important quota among the population of amputees, and it would be interesting to examine the rehabilitation statistics in all states affected by conflict to have a better idea of the number of survivors.

Landmine Victims in Kachin and Kayah

Former studies, existing data and field observations indicate that a large majority of landmine victims, at least in Kachin in northern Burma and Kayah in eastern Myanmar, are adult males who engage in dangerous

behaviors, such as hunting or traveling to the forest or their former villages (for displaced people). In most cases, people travel to dangerous locations out of economic necessity and collect basic livelihood products such as bamboo, roots, flowers, mushrooms, etc. Some of the victims were wounded while conducting military activities in government forces or various NSA groups, but most of the victims identified during the ERW Victims' Survey are civilians.

In Kayah, military operations decreased, since a ceasefire was declared between the armed groups and the government in 2012. Although not well documented, landmine accidents largely decreased in the recent past according to witness and victim interviews. Most victims encountered during the survey were wounded a long time ago. Kayah is the smallest state in Myanmar with a population of approximately 250,000 people. According to landmines victims' estimates in Kayah, there are around 250 individuals, nearly all male; 70 percent of these victims are believed to be civilians.⁶

In Kachin, the trend appears to be the opposite, although concrete data is not available. The state experienced an increase in landmine accidents; 90 percent of the recorded accidents occurred in the last four years, while 60 percent occurred in the last two years. Nearly three times the number of accidents were recorded in 2014 in comparison to 2013 (32 versus 13).⁵ Several accidents were already documented in 2015. In 2011, the ceasefire in Kachin broke down after 17 years and resulted in large-scale displacements. The fighting was more severe in 2011–2012 than in 2013–2014, but more landmine accidents were recorded during this later period. The reason for this increase is debatable, but the recent fighting likely forced people into more uncertain areas, abandoning their place of origin in haste and leaving behind essential livestock as well as agricultural land. From the limited data DDG/DRC collected in a small and unstable area, 50 percent of the recorded victims are internally displaced persons (IDP), which indicates that to make a living, IDPs must return to their place of origin to nurture their land and tend to their animals.

When examining landmine accidents, Myanmar has a remarkably high lethality rate of 30 to 35 percent, higher than neighboring countries such as Laos (26 percent) and Cambodia (20 percent).² The Cambodian Mine and ERW VIS reported an even lower lethality rate of 16 percent for the period of January 2013 to November 2014.⁶

The remoteness of accidents and poor transportation infrastructures partly explain Myanmar's high mine-lethality rate. The number of victims dying from landmine accidents is likely underestimated, as it remains too sensitive or technically complicated to report landmine/ERW accidents officially, especially if victims travel alone and remain stranded because of severe injury. Another aggravating factor is the significant use of artisanal or handmade landmines, which are potentially more lethal than traditional industrial blast-effect devices.

Until recently, MRE documentation in Myanmar was limited and poor, and most survivors indicated that they did not benefit from proper risk education before their accident. In addition, marking of hazardous areas is limited to nonexistent, except under electricity pillars in Kayah, which have unreliable and inconsistent marking.

Physical Rehabilitation and Socioeconomic Reintegration Services

As in most developing countries, assistance to persons with disabilities is very limited in Myanmar, in particular in the states bordering China and Thailand. Access to rehabilitation services can be complicated and often requires long and expensive travel, making maintenance and repairs of assistive devices difficult. In 2015, the Ministry of Health, in cooperation with ICRC, will build a rehabilitation center in Myitkyina that will facilitate access to rehabilitation services and orthopedic devices. Operated by one of the former NSA groups, a rehabilitation facility already exists in Kayah. This center is an important asset and plays a useful role in the country's rehabilitation system. However, the staff needs retraining and lacks internationally standardized technical qualifications. The facility's building would also benefit from refurbishment, cleaning and more modern equipment.

Most survivors and victim assistance organizations interviewed during the survey suggest that the greatest needs relate to psychosocial support, livelihood assistance and socioeconomic reintegration. Victim assistance cannot be conducted in isolation and should be integrated in the larger disability and rehabilitation sector. Assistance to disabled persons should be sustainable and conducted in the long term. In Myanmar, persons with disabilities are generally poorer than the rest of the community and have a lower level of education. They are also more isolated and less integrated into local society, facing discrimination and stigma.

Small business opportunities and self-employment remain limited, with little access to funding and business-management guidance.

To be effective, long-term assistance should be provided through networks of persons with disabilities and peer groups rather than to individuals. Development of disability resources centers in Kachin and Kayah can provide services such as mapping job placement, legal information and reference to vocational training as well as business-management and peer-to-peer assistance. The survey repeatedly mentioned educational support for children of persons with disabilities (school fees, uniforms, bags and books) as items that are desperately needed. For people with disabilities, facilitating physical accessibility to basic community services, such as schools, township administrations and community buildings, is also recommended.

Future of Mine Action in Myanmar

Mine action is a humanitarian imperative in Myanmar. Moreover, humanitarian mine action will be a key component of the ceasefire agreements and is a requirement to support resettlement of IDPs and refugees displaced by the conflict. Large infrastructure projects undertaken or planned by national authorities will need to be accompanied by mine clearance activities for successful implementation.

Following the resumption of armed hostilities in Kachin in 2011, many people left their villages and live in IDP camps located in government-controlled areas (GCA) as well as in nongovernment controlled areas (NGCA). Kachin and North Shan have approximately

150 IDP camps for a total of 100,000 people (79 percent of the camps are located in GCA with a population of 46,700, while 21 percent of the camps are located in NGCA with a population of 49,450 people). Most intense conflicts reportedly took place in the area between

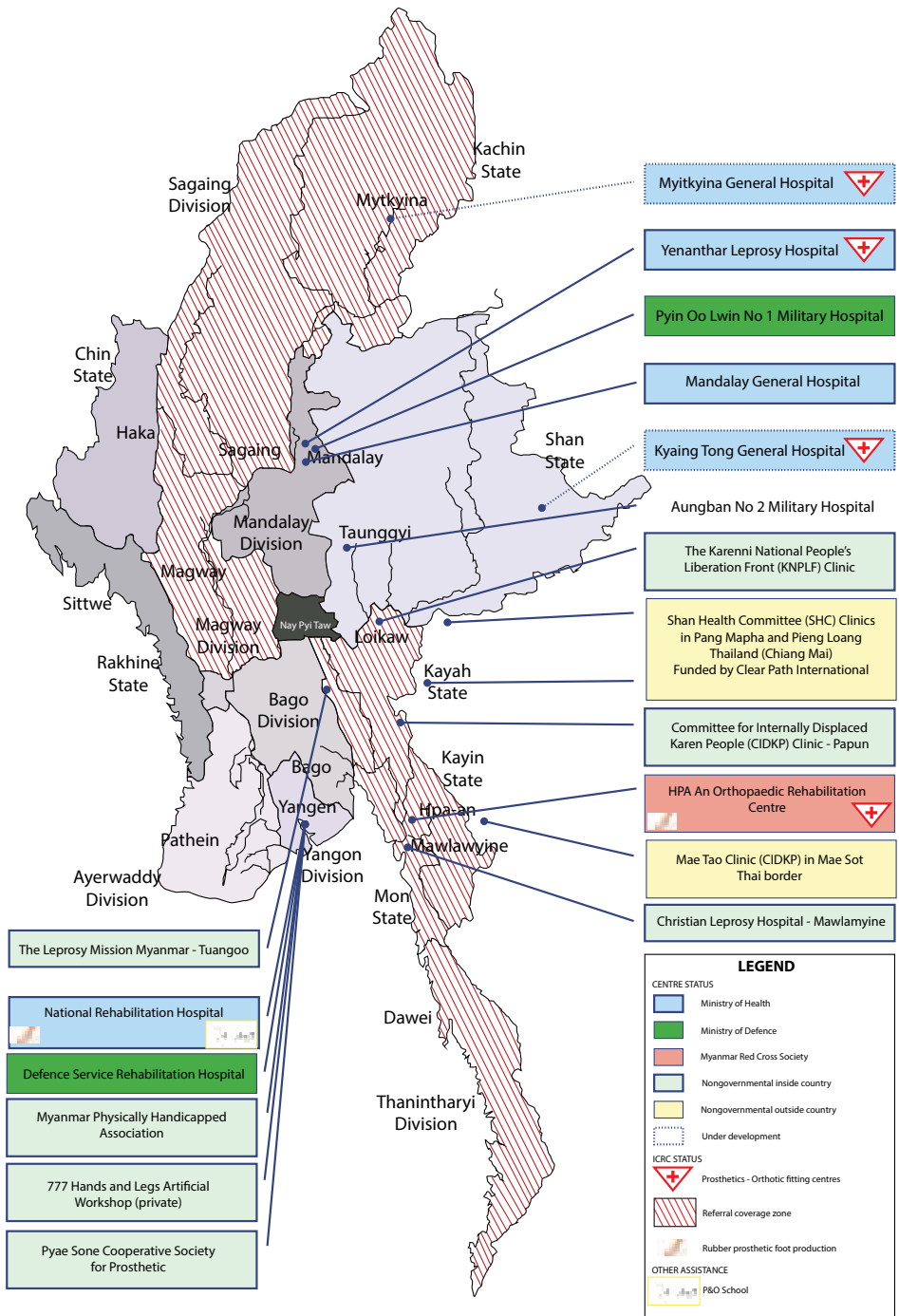


Figure 3. Map of rehabilitation services in Myanmar. Figure courtesy of ICRC.

Myitkyina and Bhamo, in the south of Mansi township and east of Momauk township. The abandoned villages are located along the front line, and those areas are naturally believed to be the most affected by landmine/ERW contamination. In Myanmar, it is important to ensure that humanitarian mine action (including survey and clearance) is conducted to high standards and should be a part of durable solutions that contribute to IDP protection as well as safe and long-term resettlement.

As with any other landmine/ERW-contaminated country, mine action planning is a complex process and should be integrated into all regional and state reconstruction and development plans. Early, participatory- and joint-planning mechanisms will need to be developed with local communities, regional authorities and humanitarian organizations to ensure that mine action has the greatest impact on local development efforts. This is usually a challenging aspect of mine action that less familiar stakeholders often underestimate.

Recommendations of the DDG/DRC Research

- Create a simple and ad hoc VIS to capture essential victims' data and inform the strategic orientations of the mine action programs.
- Reinforce MRE for the benefit of affected communities and displaced populations, and integrate MRE into school curricula.
- Provide emergency victim assistance.
- Facilitate access to physical rehabilitation services.
- Refurbish the existing Kayah rehabilitation center and enhance the technical capacities of the staff.
- Increase psychosocial support initiatives in Kachin and Kayah via self-help groups, peer-to-peer services and disability resource centers (these networks can be used to support socioeconomic reintegration activities and increase their chances of success).
- Implement and integrate sustainable socioeconomic reintegration support to landmine survivors and persons with disabilities in the community by providing vocational training and longer term socioeconomic assistance (cash grants, livelihood support, small business, etc.) through communities and disability organizations' networks.
- Provide systematic business service assistance and education for children of survivors (registration fees, school fees, books, uniforms, etc.). ©

See endnotes page 65



Roger Fasth joined Danish Demining Group (DDG) in 2002 and has worked in Myanmar since 2013. Before joining the program in Myanmar, he worked as operational manager for DDG in Copenhagen and prior to that in several of DDG's country programs. He completed his Master of Business Administration at Wales University (U.K.) in 2014.

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