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Child-to-Child Risk Education

Children are especially susceptible to the dangers of landmines. Through its Children Against Mines Program, the Marshall Legacy Institute extends mine risk education through club participation to children, who subsequently spread the valuable information to peers.

by Tycie Horsley [Marshall Legacy Institute]



A Children Against Landmines Program student delivers mine risk education (MRE) posters at a community MRE presentation. All photos courtesy of Marshall Legacy Institute.

In the past decade, dramatic improvements were made in mine clearance, but the U.N. reports that 59 countries remain contaminated by landmines, while many more are affected by unexploded ordnance (UXO) and other explosive remnants of war (ERW) that kill and injure thousands of people and animals each year. According to Jeff Abramson, editor of the *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*, “The rate of 10 casualties per day for 2012 is less than half of what

was reported when the Monitor started recording casualties in 1999 of approximately 25 casualties each day.”¹ Despite progress in mine action, these hidden killers continue instilling fear, paralyzing communities, denying land use and impeding socioeconomic growth. By affecting agricultural and infrastructure development, access to critical resources, and the emotional state of those living in threatened communities, landmines hinder the well-being of millions of people around

A Valuable Lesson

In Laghman province, Afghanistan, a leader from a neighboring village visited the Children Against Landmines Program (CHAMPS) club at their school to tell them how grateful he was for their work. He described how a group of kids in his village were throwing rocks at a large metal object they found on the outskirts of the village, and one of the children remembered what the CHAMPS club told his class when it visited the previous month. He accurately identified the object as a rocket, and the children agreed it would be wise to stop playing with it.

An explosives ordnance disposal team subsequently removed the object, confirming that the rocket was active and could have exploded. The village leader expressed his community's appreciation to the CHAMPS club during an assembly of the student body.



A CHAMPS student teaches MRE.

the world. Threatened populations, especially children, must be reminded of the dangers.

The MLI Mission

The Marshall Legacy Institute (MLI) has worked in severely contaminated countries for the past 18 years to aid in eliminating the humanitarian dangers and destabilizing effects of landmines. MLI has donated 200 mine detection dogs since its inception, and has trained local handlers to employ the dogs safely and effectively in landmine-clearance operations in 11 war-torn countries. Additionally, MLI spent the past decade increasingly focused on survivor assistance programs and providing child-to-child mine risk education (MRE). In communities surrounded by landmines, these activities encourage safe behavior by raising awareness and educating communities, particularly children, about the dangers of mines and other explosive devices. Working with local partners, MLI implemented MRE activities in many mine-affected countries including Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq and Vietnam.

CHAMPS

Children are particularly vulnerable to landmine dangers and MLI has used its Children Against Mines Program

(CHAMPS) to convey mine-awareness messages and promote behavioral changes to instill safe practices among youth in threatened communities. CHAMPS fosters global citizenship and engages students worldwide in the landmine issue, promoting the concept of children helping children and reaching 10,000 to 15,000 students each year. The program engages youth in mine-related, service-learning activities, encouraging the development of leadership skills and helping them understand that they can make a difference in the world and affect positive change.

Through CHAMPS, MLI links U.S. youth with children in mine-affected countries, and by using Internet video messengers such as Skype, these youth can discover more about each other. The resulting empathy between the children promotes a greater sense of cultural understanding. As part of the curriculum, students form CHAMPS clubs, and clubs in mine-affected countries choose young landmine survivors to assist in their community and identify their needs, while the clubs in the United States generate funding to provide for survivors' needs, such as prosthetic limbs and other medical assistance. In 2014, 45 participating schools in the United States partnered with six schools in Iraq, one school in Yemen, and three schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the mine-affected countries, trained MRE instructors teach the CHAMPS clubs

about the existence of explosive devices in their region, how to recognize and avoid the explosives, and other important mine-safety messages. With their MRE instructions, these trained youth share their newfound knowledge about mines and UXO with other children in local schools and community groups.

Each country has particular challenges, e.g., security threats in Afghanistan and Iraq make travel for CHAMPS clubs nearly impossible at times. Despite the difficulties, however, the programs have been successful. In Afghanistan, MLI worked with two schools in the Laghman and Samangan provinces, forming two CHAMPS clubs that traveled to surrounding villages and shared their MRE knowledge with more than 10,000 youth. In Iraq, MLI has had active CHAMPS clubs in Baghdad, Basra and Wassit. UNICEF estimated that nearly 1 million children in Iraq are affected by landmines, while explosives have maimed or killed hundreds since 1991.² MRE activities conducted by the CHAMPS clubs are critical in such densely mined regions, and despite security issues that limit travel opportunities, CHAMPS students delivered safety and awareness-raising presentations to more than 7,300 Iraqi youth.

In each country, MLI forms partnerships with local organizations that focus on youth, education and landmines. For example, MLI partnered with Help the Afghan Children (HTAC) and the Organization for Mine Clearance & Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR) in Kabul, Afghanistan, from June 2010 to June 2012. HTAC organized students into CHAMPS clubs in high-threat areas, and OMAR staff provided students with MRE training and information about landmines when the clubs visited the OMAR Mine Museum as part of their training activities.

Child-to-Child MRE

In each of the programs, children used creative methods to communicate with peers, such as acting out skits to engage their audience and raise awareness about mines as well as using media to send safety messages. In Vietnam, MLI formed two CHAMPS clubs in Quang Tri province, and participating students provided MRE to 2,000 other children throughout the region. Many CHAMPS youth had experienced firsthand the dangers of mines/UXO, while several knew people who were killed or seriously injured. The skits were particularly poignant, as the youth writing the plays described being forced by their parents to search for scrap metal in known minefields to help their families earn an income. The skits reinforced the hazards of mines and helped students describe to their peers how to identify, avoid and report mines/UXO.



A mine detection dog aids in the CHAMPS MRE lesson.

Other MRE Activities

In Afghanistan and Iraq, MLI engaged local demining partners in its MRE activities and incorporated into the presentations mine detection dogs that American CHAMPS students sponsored. By introducing the dogs to CHAMPS clubs, the youth learned more about demining work in nearby areas and the positive impact the lifesaving dogs have in their country. The dogs and staff from the demining organizations traveled with the CHAMPS clubs to their MRE presentations in surrounding areas, educating community members about clearance operations near their homes. A memorable addition to the MRE presentations, the dogs had the added benefit of attracting the attention of passersby.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, MLI partnered with the World Champion Fantomi Sitting Volleyball team, which is comprised primarily of landmine survivors who lost limbs, to deliver MRE to children and villagers living in mine-contaminated areas. Using trained MRE instructors from the Mine Detection Dog Center in Bosnia and Herzegovina, MLI



Children in Vietnam perform an MRE skit.

first implemented this program between 2011 and 2012, and the Fantomi team traveled with MRE experts to Brčko, Ilidža, Ilijaš, Mostar, Sapna and Zenica to perform exhibition games. The games preceded MRE classes and served to capture the children's attention, reigniting their interest in the landmine issue.

In 2015, MLI is renewing its CHAMPS program in Bosnia and Herzegovina and connecting students in two American schools with schoolchildren from three different ethnic majority regions within the country. The students will learn about one another and work together in landmine-related, service-learning projects. The Fantomi Sitting Volleyball team will participate in the MRE presentations and visit landmine-threatened communities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina to play championship and exhibition sitting volleyball games to spur interest and awareness of the mine/ERW situation. Following the Fantomi games, MRE instructors, assisted by CHAMPS students, will deliver interactive

presentations and distribute landmine-awareness materials to the youth and other vulnerable populations within the communities.

MRE Makes a Difference

The persistent threat of landmines and other UXO lingers, threatening the populations. As these insidious weapons continue ravaging dozens of countries worldwide, MRE efforts are critical to reducing their devastating impact. Creative programs like CHAMPS and interactive or sports-oriented activities have proven effective in reminding children how they can work together and learn from each other how best to live safely in areas contaminated by mines and other explosives. ©

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