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The Democratic Republic of the Congo's National Landmines Contamination Survey

The absence of accurate data on the scope and location of landmine contamination negatively affected more than a decade of mine action activities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This article discusses the 2013 National Landmines Contamination Survey and its results.

by Pascal Simon [Mine Action Specialist]
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In the past, information about landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) was often reported sporadically and inaccurately to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) office in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Nonspecialized organizations or personnel were often confused about the different kinds of explosive threats, i.e., anti-personnel landmines (APL), UXO, abandoned ammunition, etc. As a result, redundant threat reports reduced the efficiency of the database operated by UNMAS by adding thousands of duplicates and unreliable records. Despite several attempts to clear up the database, the quality of the information available to mine action professionals remained poor. While the nature of the available information was deficient, the information-management tools and staff were not. Recently, the program prioritized efforts to improve the quality of information pertaining to the presence of landmines in the DRC.

First Attempts

From 2011 to 2012, UNMAS initiated several general mine action assessment (GMAA) projects that various international organizations then implemented.¹ However, the country's phenomenal size, lack of security, and poor road conditions limited travel and communication, affecting the quality of the information. In addition, the methodology used during GMAA projects slowed the process and proved to be expensive. Survey teams were required to investigate the landmine and UXO presence along all passable roads in each of the DRC suspect territories.² The method was time consuming,

and the cost of surveying the whole country appeared to exceed the cost of clearing all APL in DRC's contaminated areas. These initial complications challenged the DRC's efforts to comply with Article 5 of the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction* (APMBC).

In 2012, the DRC obtained a two-year extension for its Article 5 deadline to document the scope of landmine contamination and develop a final extension request. GMAA methodology could not provide the necessary information on time to the United Nations and the national mine action center: *Centre Congolais de Lutte Antimines*. Therefore, the methodology needed to be adapted to reflect the size of the country in the limited, remaining time available to complete survey operations.

The National Landmines Contamination Survey

In 2013, with Japanese funding and in agreement with national mine action authorities, UNMAS DRC launched the National Landmines Contamination Survey (NLCS), adopting a more suitable methodology in line with the latest non-technical survey (NTS) standards. As APL contamination is believed to be relatively modest in the DRC compared to the country's size, the new approach focused on surveying locations where the suspicion of contamination could be documented. To avoid redundant efforts and to save time, territories already visited by GMAA would not be resurveyed. Since the DRC is in the process of acceding to the *Convention on Cluster Munitions*, UNMAS DRC also collected information on possible cluster munitions.

The survey complied with the International Mine Action Standards by adhering to the usual NTS steps as follows:³

1. Desk assessments, reviews of existing information (including location of documented mine accidents)
2. Analyses of past clearance operations' results and findings
3. Meetings with key informants in targeted provinces, territories and communes (opinions collection)
4. Physical visits to field locations where contamination is considered credible and probable
5. Reporting of collected data to the UNMAS Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database operated by UNMAS DRC

In the field, national operators physically implemented the project with the support of international mine action organizations, each of them responsible for a specific geographical area.^{4,5} Field operations took place during the last six months of 2013; the data verification and analysis and purging of duplicates, as well as the survey report, were finalized during the first quarter of 2014. International organizations provided quality control, operational support and capacity development for the national operators. In addition, risk education was systematically provided to local populations during the implementation of the project, reaching a total of 27,000 people.

Results

In the opinion-collection phase of the project, UNMAS DRC

- Surveyed more than 2,400 people in 142 provincial, district and territorial meetings.
- Visited a total of 390 villages representing 403 suspected hazardous areas (SHA), where staff questioned 4,000 people.
- Included a total of eight provinces, 14 districts and 40 territories to be surveyed according to NTS standards.

Final results of the GMAA and NLCS were recorded in the IMSMA database and provide a comprehensive picture of contamination in the DRC:

- A total of 130 landmine-contaminated SHAs were identified.
- Landmine-contaminated areas are estimated at slightly less than 2,000,000 sq m (494 ac).
- Eight provinces contain SHAs, but Equateur, Katanga, Kasai-Occidental and Orientale are the most affected provinces (from most to least contaminated) and include more than 90 percent of the contaminated lands.
- Five cluster munitions contaminated SHAs were identified, four of which are located in the Equator province.

The NLCS report included planning and cost estimates used to document the APMBC Article 5 extension request

submitted by DRC to States Parties during the Third Review Conference on the APMBC in Maputo, Mozambique, in June 2014.⁶ Based on past clearance operations, UNMAS DRC and local authorities agreed that logistical and communication challenges will raise demining costs in the DRC and recognized that future technical survey activities would cancel some of the SHAs identified by NLCS. By combining manual demining with mechanical support, UNMAS roughly estimated that the cost of clearance operations would be around US\$15 per sq m, totaling approximately \$20 million.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Completing NLCS constituted a major success and was a marked improvement for the DRC mine action program. Combined with the information previously provided by GMAA projects, NLCS delivered a country-appropriate methodology that could assess the DRC and laid out a new baseline that will be used in the future to plan clearance operations more efficiently.

Information collected in the DRC suggests that landmine contamination is modest and cluster munition contamination is relatively minimal despite being spread over a large number of SHAs, districts and villages. Previous clearance operations estimate that the DRC can comply with its international obligations sometime within the next six years if provided a budget of approximately \$3 to \$4 million per year. NLCS results assisted DRC mine action authorities in successfully obtaining an APMBC Article 5 extension until the end of 2019.

As requested in Maputo by States Parties to the APMBC, the DRC will develop a detailed and precise mine clearance plan, explaining how operations will concretely be organized and outlined, before the second quarter of 2015. This plan will reaffirm the national commitment to eliminate landmine and cluster munition contamination, and will encourage future funding to the program.

Obtaining contributions from donors and the national budget will remain a challenge, but convincing development partners to provide the necessary financial resources to address the problem is considered highly essential. The DRC would benefit from using national military or police capacities to assist the program to reduce clearance costs and develop clearance capacity to address any residual contamination threats over the long term. Thanks to years of international presence and support, many national experts are now available in the DRC, and the emergence of national civilian demining organizations could also be part of the solution. ©

See Figure 1 next page.

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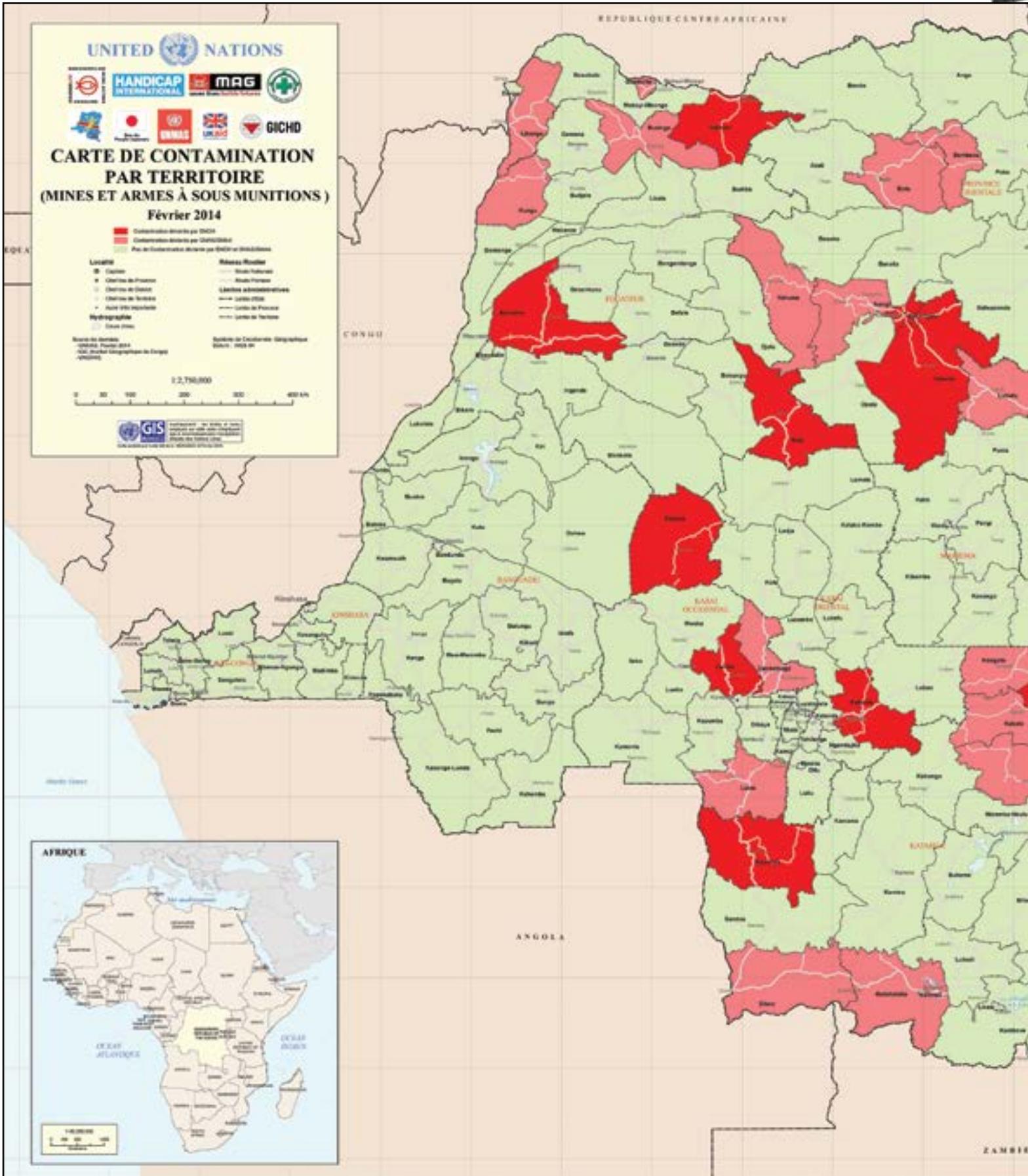
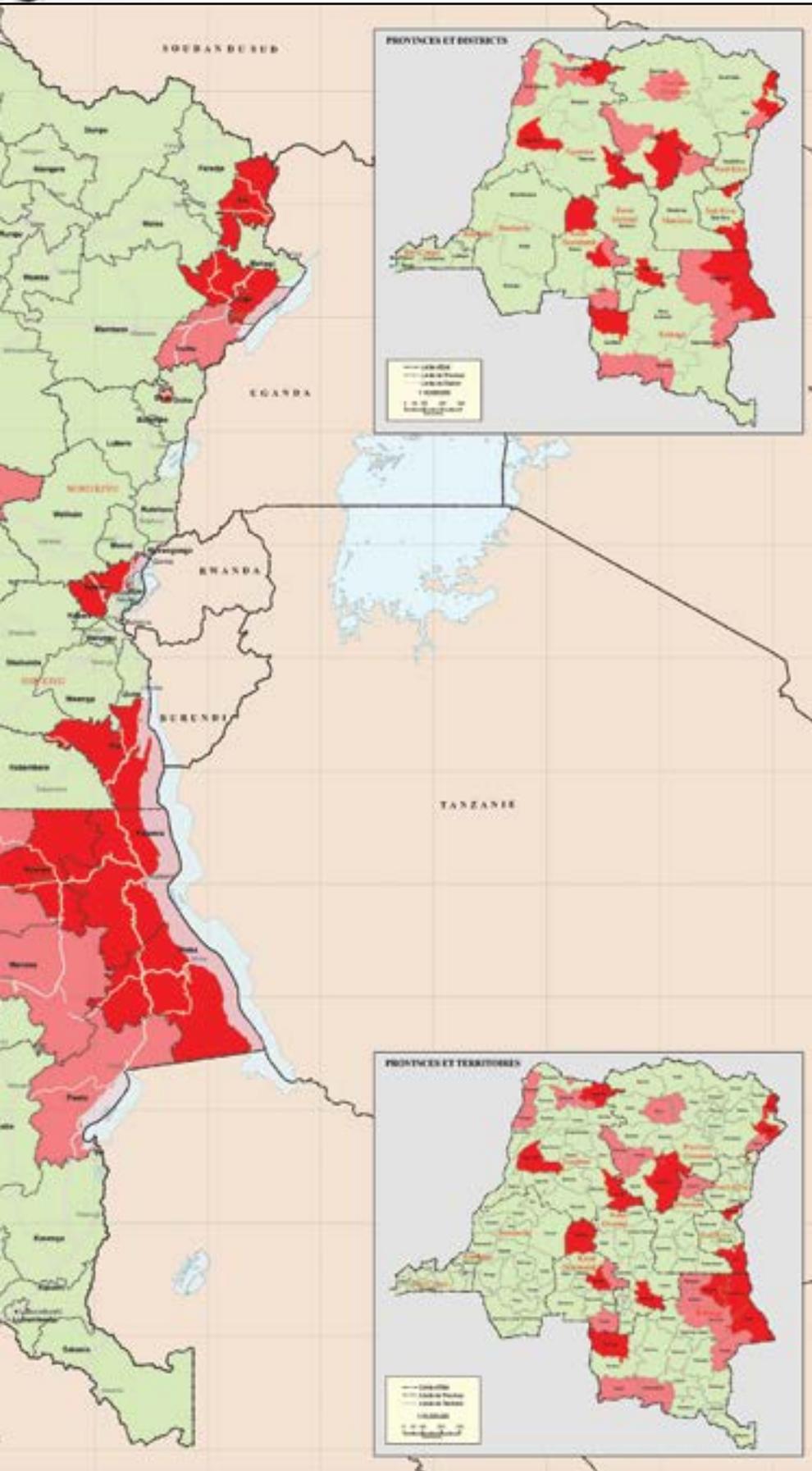


Figure 1. A map depicting the national contaminated territories in the DRC. Graphic courtesy of UNMAS.



Pascal Simon is a mine action specialist and was the UNMAS-DRC program manager until September 2014. A mine action and capacity-development specialist, inter alia, with extensive professional experience, he previously worked in Cambodia, Laos, Senegal and Tajikistan, supporting efforts to develop and reform mine action programs and related institutions. He holds a master's degree in political science and international relations from the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium) and he also studied journalism and pedagogy. He is based in Myanmar.

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