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Demining in Remote Areas of Northern Afghanistan

Since September 2010, the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD) has carried out survey-and-clearance operations in the isolated Darwaz region of northern Afghanistan, where explosive-ordnance caches and unexploded ordnance and mine contamination remain a serious concern.

by Artyom Harutyunyan [FSD]



An FSD demining team on the way to a minefield in Darwaz (June 2013).
All photos courtesy of FSD.

Darwaz, one of the most remote regions in the Badakhshan province, is located in the northernmost tip of Afghanistan. Bordered by Tajikistan, Darwaz is separated by the Hindu Kush mountain range. Inaccessible to vehicles from the south, Darwaz can only be reached by serviceable roads on the Tajik side of the border or on foot from within Afghanistan. Locals have no direct communication with the rest of the country.¹ Mountain paths enable people to reach these areas in two to four days on foot or by horse-drawn transport, but paths cannot be used during the autumn, winter or spring due to snow.

As severe topography isolates Darwaz from the rest of Afghanistan, the region has not benefitted from the

25-year effort toward clearing Afghanistan from deadly explosive remnants of war (ERW). Tajikistan is key to accessing Darwaz. No other approach makes operations in the area feasible. *Fondation Suisse de Déminage* (Swiss Foundation for Mine Action, or FSD) is the first and only humanitarian demining organization to become accredited for mine action in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. From the logistical vantage point of Tajikistan across the Amu Darya river, FSD deployed assets to the area in 2010.

Primary Concerns in Northern Afghanistan

Landmines in border areas. During Soviet occupation from December 1979 to February 1989, the Soviet Union



A mine ERW impact community survey team crosses a river in Darwaz district (August 2014)

stationed military assets on both sides of the Amu Darya and Panj rivers, which served as the border between (the then Soviet Republic of) Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Minefields were laid as a protection measure against Mujahedeen attacks. Thousands of mines remain in operational condition.

Landmines on pathways. The northern districts of Badakhshan province are mainly inaccessible to motorized transport. Paths for animals and people are extensive and vital to socioeconomic subsistence. Soviet forces attempted to block many routes by scattering PFM-1 anti-personnel cluster submunitions. These mines remain extremely hazardous.

Unexploded ordnance (UXO). During Soviet occupation, small-scale battles between Soviet forces and Mujahedeen opposition forces left UXO contamination in many areas across all five districts. Children playing and families conducting agricultural activities often encounter UXO. Accidents occur frequently.

Explosive-ordnance caches. During the 1992–1997 civil war in Tajikistan, the Islamic State of Tajikistan opposition forces used connections with the Afghan Mujahedeen to base logistic support assets in parts of northern Darwaz. Ammunition

and explosive-ordnance stockpiles were cached in bunkers, caves and covered pits across the area. These are frequently uncovered and lead to accidents, causing death or injury.

FSD started its operations in Badakhshan in September 2010. Until 31 September 2012, the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) supported the project. In October 2012, the German Federal Foreign Office via the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan Regional Integration Programme (PATRIP) Foundation provided funding for the project, which will continue until the end of 2014. At various times in the project, one to two manual demining teams were deployed while one to four teams delivered mine-risk education. At the time of this publication, the program has already trained 40 national staff. The program consists of one manual demining team and two mine/ERW community survey teams. FSD surveyed more than 50 hazardous areas totaling 4 million sq m (1.5 sq mi), and as of August 2014, FSD cleared 11 of those areas, in which 2,802 pieces of UXO and 11,474 mines were disarmed and destroyed.



An FSD team moves between villages in Khwahan district (May 2014).

In 2015, hazardous-area survey work across all five districts will be complete, and Khwahan district will be entirely clear of hazardous ordnance. At the current level of funding and operational output, FSD expects Darwaz to be mine-impact free within three to five years.

Modus operandi. FSD's administrative and logistical office is located in the portion of Darwaz that lies within Tajikistan's borders. FSD's operation provides teams with deployment support and extraction services; a paved road lies along the Tajik side of the river and five bridges cross the river (and the border of Tajikistan-Afghanistan).

During work-plan preparation, the operational department determines the bridge of closest proximity to a given task. Command staff with demining and medical equipment load into vehicles and are driven to a bridge where they cross the border into Afghanistan within the span of a few hours. This is the optimal method for transporting assets into the region, as the lack of roads from the southern approach incurs several days additional travel time.

Demining- and survey-team cycles last six weeks, during which the team lives in tents away from their families. Stand-

down periods last two weeks and occur when staff members return home to their families.

Medevac. Unfortunately, medical clinics in Nusai, Afghanistan, and Kalaikhum, Tajikistan, are not equipped to provide assistance to injured staff if accidents occur and comprehensive medical evacuation is required. FSD relies on provision of qualified first aid and victim stabilization from these two clinics. However, proper medical care can be provided only in Dushanbe, the Tajik capital.

FSD's medical evacuation plans include crossing the Afghan-Tajik border and transporting injured staff to the government hospital in Tajikistan, a six-hour trip via ambulance. In case of emergencies, an agreement with the hospital's trauma-provision department and FSD has already been tested following landmine accidents. Agreements with Tajik authorities at all levels, as well as a special permit from the border guards for injured employees crossing the border, give confidence that lives will be saved in the event of an accident.

Challenges and Constraints

Crossborder projects between Afghanistan and Tajikistan



Open air MRE training. Not all villages in the Darwaz region have schools to conduct formal trainings (May 2014).

carry certain risks and threats due to past military conflicts, namely the Tajikistan civil war (1992–1997) and the various stages of the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan (1979–1989).

Changes in the geopolitical situation and deterioration of security in Shighnan district, Badakhshan province in particular, jeopardize humanitarian work. The security situation can deteriorate in Tajikistan as well; armed opposition groups clashed in Gharm and Gorno-Badakhshan in 2010 and 2012, respectively.

Apart from this risk, which mostly pertains to armed opposition groups, deterioration of Afghan-Tajik cooperation can greatly impact crossborder projects. FSD established a memorandum of understanding between both countries' governments regarding crossborder project activities, which Tajik President Emomali Rahmon and former Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed in Dushanbe in October 2013. In August 2014, the memorandum was ratified by Parliament in Tajikistan and approved by Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

As mentioned previously, the only reliable route of supply is through Tajikistan, from Dushanbe-Kulob-Shurabad-Kalaikhum. Shurabad Pass and the road to Kalaikhum (the location of FSD Afghanistan's main support office) suffers from heavy snowfalls and rains during the autumn, winter and spring seasons. Avalanches, mudslides or rock falls can block roads. In some places without bridges, rivers can flood, making crossing difficult, which can cause extensive delays.

Located in a border area, FSD's project is subject to the jurisdiction of different authorities in Tajikistan. For any foreigner in Tajikistan, the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) must approve access to Badakhshan. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, SCNS and Tajikistan border guards can allow or deny access to Darwaz for national or international citizens without explanation.

Multi-entry Afghanistan visas for expatriates and Tajik staff are continuous problems. Currently, only monthly, single-entry visas are issued, which hampers frequent field



Girls in Darwaz receive MRE materials, Nusai district (June 2013).

visits and inspections. The multi-entry Tajikistan visas decreased for Afghan staff from six to three months validity without any clear explanations from the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, the Tajik or Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs sometimes delay or deny visas for staff.

Lessons Learned

Originally, the FSD Afghanistan project office in Kabul consisted of two people: a finance officer and logistics officer. The main staff duties were delivering prepared, semi-annual and annual financial reports to the Ministry of Economy as well as annual reports to the Ministry of Finance. A program manager supervised the Kabul office remotely from Dushanbe. For security reasons, trips to Kabul were not possible for about a year, which prevented FSD from monitoring office employees and interacting with the Mine Action Coordination Center of Afghanistan (MACCA) and Afghan Department of Mine Clearance (DMC) management. Accordingly, meetings with Afghan Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Economics department heads did not occur. As a result, problems arose be-

tween FSD and these ministries and departments. The Ministry of Economics refused several times to accept semifinancial reports, and MACCA/DMC management began ignoring FSD operations in the farthest northeastern region of Afghanistan.

To rectify these problems, FSD frequently travels to Kabul to conduct meetings with the Ministry of Economics and Ministry of Finance as well as the MACCA and DMC directors. Additionally, Kabul staff received internal trainings, and the scope of responsibility was changed to include FSD representatives at meetings with mine action actors and stakeholders as well as at general meetings with nongovernmental organizations.

Neglecting coordination with stakeholders and relevant authorities in Kabul can cause adverse reactions and affect all programs. FSD Afghanistan continues to work with relevant actors and agencies to preclude problems and complete its work on the Afghan-Tajik border. ©

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Artyom Harutyunyan has been involved in mine action and ERW removal since 2000, and his first job was as an explosive ordnance disposal operator. He has worked with international mine action organizations in Angola, Armenia, Mozambique, Nagorno-Karabakh and Western Sahara. After spending four years as an FSD technical adviser in a weapons and ammunition disposal project in Tajikistan, Harutyunyan manages a cross-border program in rural Afghanistan.

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