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## Weapons and Ammunition Security: The Expanding Role of Mine Action

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# Weapons and Ammunition Security: The Expanding Role of Mine Action

Significant expertise is necessary to meet the security challenges posed by unsecured and poorly stored weapons and ammunition. To address this threat, many donors and mine action actors, including the United Nations Mine Action Service, are including weapons and ammunition security management as a core role.

by Elena Rice [ United Nations Mine Action Service ]



The inside of a damaged ammunition bunker.  
*Photo courtesy of the author.*

On 27 November 1944, an underground bunker holding 4,000 tons of ordnance detonated at the Royal Air Force Fauld underground munitions depot in Staffordshire, England. The explosion was the largest non-nuclear explosion ever recorded, leaving behind the Hanbury Crater (120 m deep [394 ft] and 1.2 km [1,312 yd] wide). While the exact death toll is unknown, approximately 70 people died.<sup>1</sup> Time and time again, accidental explosions

at ammunition storage facilities have caused death and destruction. For example, in Nigeria in 2002 an armory explosion claimed 1,100 lives. In 2012 in the Republic of the Congo (ROC) 282 people were killed, and children at a nearby school were spared only because the explosion occurred on a weekend.<sup>2</sup>

The human tragedy of these events highlights the importance of preventive measures against unplanned explosions.



A damaged ammunition bunker in Libya.  
*Photo courtesy of author.*

However, the immediate impact is compounded by what is arguably a more widely catastrophic byproduct of improperly stored stocks. The medium- to long-term security threat posed by unsecured munitions holds exponentially more dangerous potential for destabilizing countries and regions, with serious implications for international peace and security.

Proliferation of weapons and ammunition during and in the aftermath of recent conflicts starkly reveals the dangers of unsecured arms and ammunition. As Moammar Gadhafi's government gradually lost control over Libya in 2011, opposition forces and other groups gained access to unsecured depots. Looted weapons have since been traced to Gaza, Somalia, and West and North Africa. The U.N. Security Council stated in December 2012 that "the continued proliferation of weapons from within and outside [the Sahel] threatens the stability of states in the region."<sup>3</sup> Weapons proliferation fuels insurgency, with the 2012–2013 crisis in Mali clearly demonstrating the impact of poorly stored and easily accessible weapons.

#### **Stockpile Security**

With the U.N. General Assembly calling for "practical measures" to mitigate this threat, the international community increasingly recognizes the challenge and calls upon states

to make realistic assessments of the potential security risks of their stockpiles, while appealing to states in a position to do so to assist those with less developed capacity.<sup>4,5</sup> Ensuring the physical security of storage facilities reduces the possibility that these weapons will be removed and used for nefarious purposes, including as components of improvised explosive devices. The role of the mine action community in alleviating this risk is apparent and the need to focus resources into practical implementation in the field is increasingly recognized.

The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) involvement in weapons and ammunition security management draws upon its ability to contribute expert skills, specialized equipment, and experience with explosive hazards. Several UNMAS-implemented projects focus on securing weapons and ammunition first and storing the materials second, emphasizing simple preventive measures such as perimeter fencing around formal and informal storage areas. For instance, with the program in Misrata, Libya, UNMAS placed secure storage containers inside the existing ammunition storage areas (ASA), which were too large to secure quickly. Implementing nongovernmental organizations (NGO) conducted clearance inside the ASA to provide space, then added fencing to increase security around the portion of the ASA that was cleared. While extensive damage has already been



Libyan stockpile with artillery shells and a man-portable air-defense system (MANPADS).  
*Photo courtesy of Nathan Beriro.*

done in terms of weapons proliferation from Libya to regional conflicts, these measures, implemented at the local and national levels, address the ongoing threat in the context of Libya's efforts to restore public security.

The U.N. program in Cote d'Ivoire represents a pivotal success for mine action-driven implementation of weapons and ammunition management. The HALO Trust (HALO), with UNMAS coordination, worked with Ivorian security forces to rehabilitate a majority of the country's storage facilities. National technical capacity was strengthened to such an extent that the state became a regional model for safe and secure ammunition storage and is increasingly called upon to share experience and technical expertise. In a strong display of South-South cooperation, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the ROC visited Cote d'Ivoire in 2012 to learn from its experience and apply the country's methods in the implementation of their own national weapons and ammunition management operations.<sup>6</sup>

UNMAS made strong headway in accessing peacekeeping and political funds for weapons and ammunition man-

agement, successfully advocating to the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations and U.N. Department of Political Affairs that unsecured munitions threaten security and stability and fuel terrorist activities. As a result, the U.N. missions in Cote d'Ivoire, DRC, Libya and South Sudan have allocated specific funding to UNMAS for projects that address security and storage. UNMAS has in turn coordinated and implemented these activities through NGOs, such as HALO, MAG (Mines Advisory Group) and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency. As circumstances demonstrate the necessity for similar projects in Mali and other conflict-affected countries, the trend of including weapons and ammunition security management funding in peacekeeping budgets will likely continue.

#### **The Expanding Role of Mine Action**

The term **mine action** implies that the work focuses solely on landmines. Many states and NGOs have long advocated that explosive remnants of war (ERW) and small arms/light weapons (SA/LW) need to be looked at in unison. For

example, the U.S. Department of State initiated a comprehensive approach to conventional weapons destruction (CWD) incorporating mines, ERW and SA/LW, as well as physical security and stockpile management (PSSM) with the consolidation of several related offices into the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in 2003; other states have also adopted this approach.

An important step in educating the disarmament-focused diplomatic community was the participation of UNMAS and several mine action NGOs, including MAG and Handicap International, in the Programme of Action on SA/LW in September 2012.<sup>1</sup> For instance, UNMAS presented a side event at the conference: “Preventing big bangs and saving lives” focused on UNMAS work in Cote d’Ivoire and Libya. “Practical implementation lessons: armory and stockpile assessment in Africa” was organized by the U.K.’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office and MAG. These efforts represent progress in encouraging member states to adopt an expanded mine action role. However, more remains to be done before the mine action community is recognized as a key implementer, supporting the weapons and ammunition management agenda. All mine action actors are responsible for lobbying, advocacy and re-branding their wide range of work (to include all mine action, CWD, PSSM, SA/LW and weapons security issues) as critical for both security and development.

Second, sufficient and sustained funding is essential to the predictability and effectiveness of interventions; however, gaining access to funds remains a challenge for those implementing mine action. Mine action implementers must continue to engage in outreach efforts, establish new links with these entities and lobby states likely to fund projects in affected states.

Mine action work has traditionally been funded through a dedicated governmental department for mine action or by offices dealing with humanitarian funding. Meanwhile resources for weapons and ammunition management projects are frequently derived from different departments focusing on disarmament, nonproliferation, security and stabilization. Clear exceptions exist, for example the U.S. State Department has consolidated CWD and PSSM funding in one combined budget. Likewise U.K.’s Department for International Development has generously funded arms and ammunition management alongside conventional mine action in combined projects. We hope that this trend will continue.

By securing weapons and ammunition, the mine action community can prevent their proliferation and misuse by nonstate actors. This role for mine action is becoming increasingly recognized by U.N. member states. However, more work remains, including accessing new resource pools and expanding or re-branding the mine action mission to correspond with the widening spectrum of its activities. UNMAS stands ready to assist with these efforts. 

*See endnotes page 64*

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the United Nations.*



Elena Rice began her mine action career in 2006 with the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) in South Sudan. She has worked for UNMAS in Afghanistan and in Gaza in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead. Currently, she works in New York as special adviser to the UNMAS director. Originally from Belfast, Northern Ireland, Rice holds two master’s degrees from the University of Edinburgh in the U.K.

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