

Assessment of Vietnam's National Mine Action Program

A December 2012 assessment conducted by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining and the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation found that despite Vietnam's well-received mine action program reform efforts, various factors, including economic and bureaucratic challenges, continue hindering progress.

by Ted Paterson [GICHD] and Thao Griffiths [VVAF]

Vietnam suffers from extensive landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) contamination as a result of the Vietnam War (1965–1973).¹ Vietnamese officials maintain that ERW contamination covers one-fifth of Vietnam's total land area, or 66,000 sq km (25,483 sq mi), and that an estimated 350,000–600,000 tons of ERW still need to be cleared.²

Vietnam's response to contamination has undergone a number of distinct stages:

- 1975–1979. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) organized post-war clearance efforts as a campaign model to clear essential livelihood spaces.
- 1979–2006. Military demining supported national development projects.
- 2006–2010. On 29 April 2008, the government of Vietnam initiated mine action reforms, including the establishment of Vietnam Bomb and Mine Action Center (VBMAC), a civilian entity housed within the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA).²
- 2010–present. Vietnam's National Mine Action Program (VNMAP) transitions from military to civilian oversight.

Financing Mine Action

VNMAP (also known as Program 504 in Vietnam as it was established in Decree 504 by the Prime Minister in December 2010) is funded primarily by its national budget and private investors, through four channels—the MoD, other ministries, subnational governments and private investors—as depicted in Table 1.³ A number of international mine action nongovernmental organizations (NGO) are active in Vietnam and generally work with provincial governments. International donors fund these NGOs. Grants from international donors such as Australia, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Taiwan, the U.K. and the U.S. averaged about US\$6.1 million per annum in recent years and continue to rise.

Still, the bulk of funding comes from Vietnam's national budget. Engineering Command—Vietnam's headquarters for military engineering units, including demining units—reports that demining expenditures averaged US\$20 million from 1979 to 2006, then rose significantly from 2006 to 2010, driven largely by a demand for demining support to infrastructure projects and private investments.⁴ The recession in 2011 led to a reduction in public and private investment, delaying implementation for a number of approved demining tasks.

Source of funding	Decision-makers	Purpose	Service provider
National budget	Ministry of Defence	Military requirements	Military deminers
	Other ministries	Public investment	Military
	Sub-national governments	Provincial-district-commune investments	Local demining firms NGOs
Private investors	Private investors	Private investments	Firms

Table 1. VNMAP's funding channels.
All graphics courtesy of the authors.

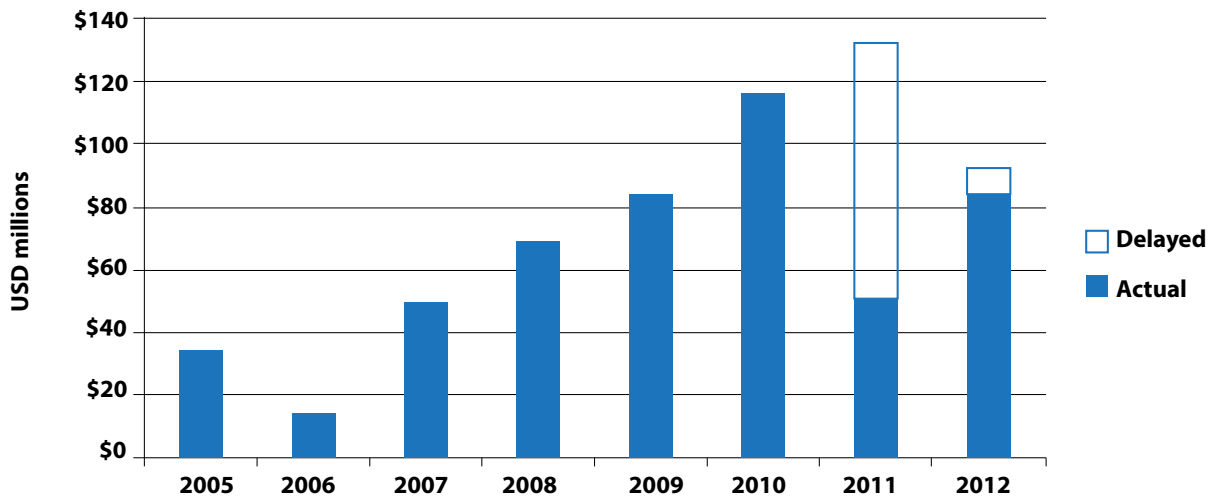


Figure 1. Annual expenditures for survey and clearance operations.

VNMAP's financing pattern is distinctly different from that in most other mine/ERW-affected countries (Figures 2, 3 and Table 2).

Outline of Recent Reforms

Evidence from the Vietnam Landmine Impact Survey (VLIS), as well as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, suggests that VNMAP is effective in terms of development (e.g., support to public and private investment projects).⁵ However, the national program was not as effective in supporting humanitarian mine action for bottom-up initiatives of communities or for targeting clearance and mine risk education (MRE) services based on casualties incurred.

In addition, Vietnam was unable to attract international mine action support, in part because many donors refuse to finance activities undertaken by the MoD. Therefore, VBMAC initiated the reform with a demining capacity under MoLISA. VBMAC received some international funding, but this has been sporadic.

In 2010 the government approved an ambitious National Mine Action Program Plan for 2010–2025, with seven tasks set for the period of 2010 to 2015:

- Complete VLIS
- Conduct unexploded ordnance (UXO)/landmine clearance projects that support the government's socio-economic development plans and ensure safety for the people
- Establish a national database center
- Develop the Vietnamese National Mine Action Standards
- Implement MRE programs
- Initiate victim assistance
- Raise international awareness of the scale of Vietnam's contamination

In 2011, the government established and appointed members to a steering committee to oversee the VNMAP plan. The plan for 2010–2015 was extremely ambitious; financing requirements reached \$110 million in 2011 and continue to rise in subsequent years to an annual average of almost \$150 million. Implementation was successful on some components,

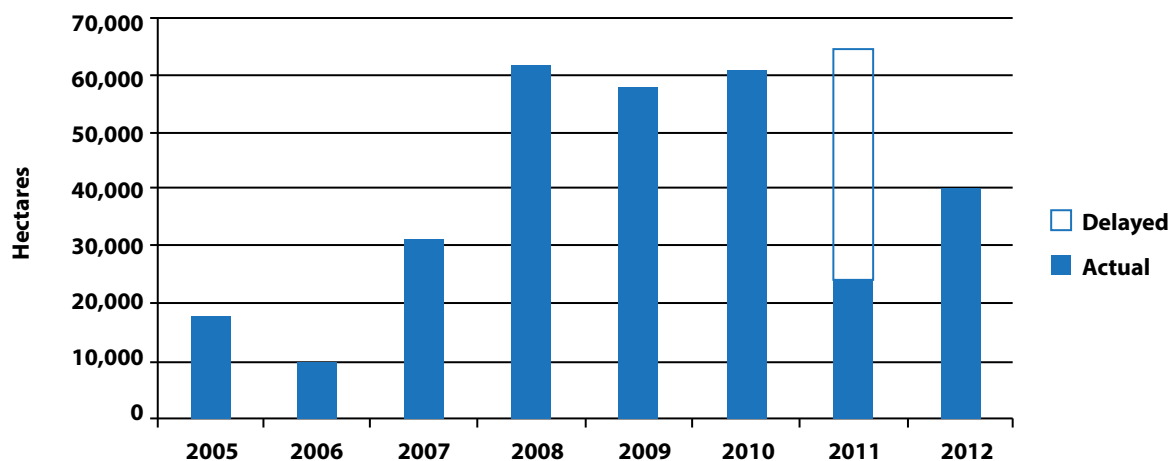


Figure 2. Areas cleared by year in Vietnam.

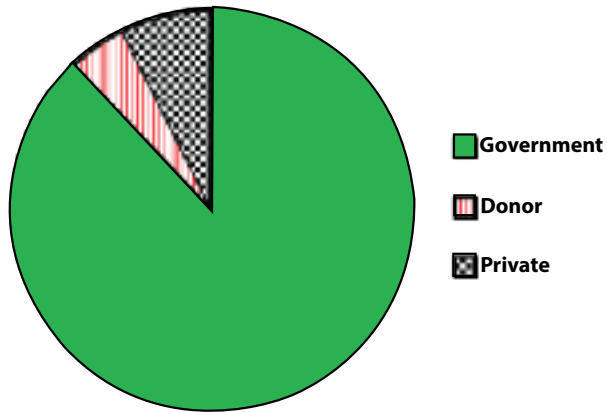


Figure 3. Financing VNMAP in Vietnam (2009).

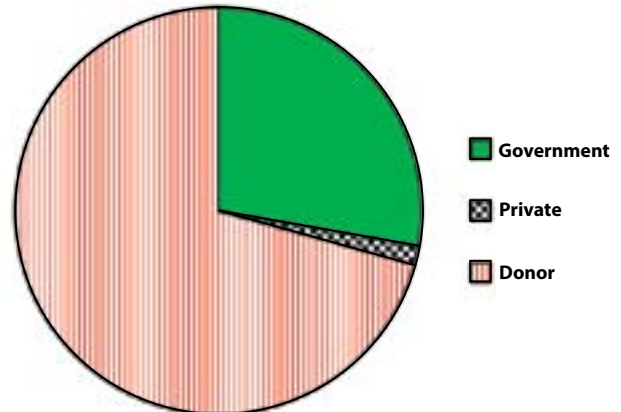


Figure 4. Financing mine action in other countries.³



Map of Vietnam.

such as VLIS, but progress was uneven overall. In some cases, the international community seemingly remained largely unaware of new initiatives launched by VNMAP.

Assessment

In June 2012 Vietnamese mine action officials requested that the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) undertake an assessment of VNMAP.

The results were reported in December 2012 at the Vietnam Mine Action Forum held 14 December 2012 in Hanoi. The assessment focused specifically on the views of international stakeholders.

Working with the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAFA), GICHD developed a simple questionnaire and distributed it primarily through email to donors, U.N. agencies, operators, government ministries and provincial authorities involved in mine action. Then, on a trip to the cities of Hanoi, Quang Tri and Hue in October 2012, an assessment team from VVAFA and GICHD met with 19 organizations to review responses and ask follow-up questions.

The assessment team obtained 21 questionnaire responses which were broken down into the following categories:

- Operators (7)
- Donors (5)
- Government ministries/offices (5)
- Provinces (2)
- U.N. agencies (1)
- Consultants (1)

Findings

In brief, the assessment found that international stakeholders approved of VNMAP, but current progress disappointed them. More specifically, the majority of respondents were happy with VBMAC's establishment in 2008 and with the announcement of a national program in 2010 for a variety of reasons, as these actions showed the following:

- Signified growing awareness within the Vietnamese government of the mine/UXO problem
- Included provision of MRE and victim assistance
- Suggested greater transparency and a level playing field (i.e., national standards that all operators would be required to meet)

- Indicated that a balanced approach might emerge, with more demining targeted to support community development and reduce the number of victims

Though the national program represented a significant advance, several flaws were noted, including the following:

- Vietnam's unwillingness to join the *Convention on Cluster Munitions*
- The failure to make VBMAC fully civilian
- Lack of oversight, as VBMAC serves as both a national mine action center and as a demining operator

Most international stakeholders were unhappy with the rate of implementation for one or more components of the 2010–2015 plan. Specific concerns included the following:

- Delays in completing the national standards
- Failure to appoint full-time personnel to VBMAC
- Lack of communication by national officials

International stakeholders favorably mentioned a number of recent actions, including the attendance of VBMAC officials at Mine Action Working Group meetings and the meeting of the first Vietnam Mine Action Forum in December 2011.

Interestingly, most international stakeholders seemed unaware of progress on certain fronts. For example, they were not aware of MRE messages broadcast on television in Vietnam. Nor did they know that highly contaminated provinces received national budget transfers of approximately \$7.5 million per year in 2011 and 2012 for demining projects.

Concerns raised most often were the continuing dependence of VBMAC on the MoD, VBMAC's lack of progress in drafting national standards, establishment of a true mine action center and the absence of a national database center.

Operators emphasized that they worked closely with provincial authorities and were not fully aware of developments in Hanoi. Most said relations with provincial authorities were improving steadily; a few expressed concern that the new national program might create problems for operators because of additional registration requirements.

International respondents presented a number of hypotheses as to why implementation lagged:

Year	Financing (\$ millions)		Total funding	International as % of total
	Government & investors	International grants ³		
07	\$ 49.50	\$ 3.95	\$ 53.45	7.39%
08	\$ 69.50	\$ 7.64	\$ 77.14	9.90%
09	\$ 84.17	\$ 4.20	\$ 88.37	4.75%
10	\$ 116.70	\$ 7.07	\$ 123.77	5.71%
11	\$ 50.73	\$ 7.89	\$ 58.62	13.46%

Table 2. Annual financing requirements for VNMAP 2011–2015.

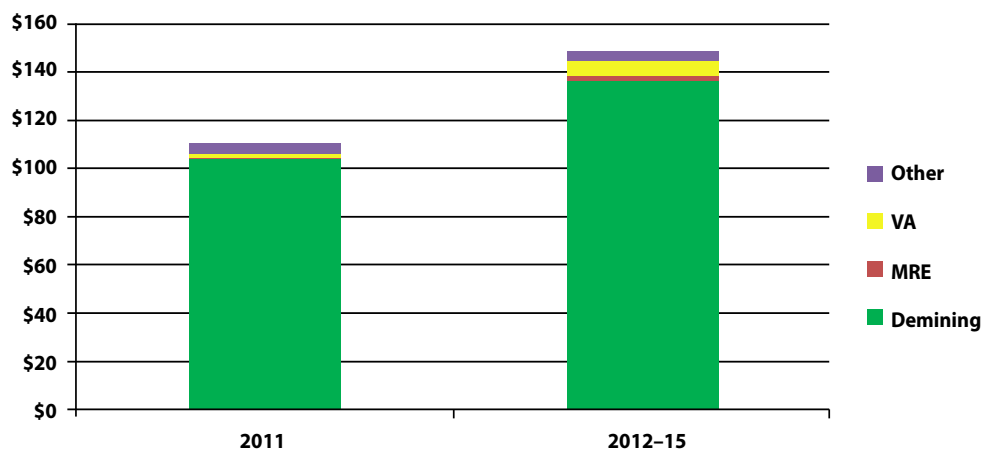


Figure 5. Annual financing requirements for VNMAP 2011–2015.

- Recent economic downturn pushed mine action lower on the government agenda.
- Bureaucratic battles delayed progress (e.g., MoD wanted to keep full control of demining).
- Unresolved policy issues (e.g., the relative roles of national ministries and provincial governments) hindered implementation.
- Inaccuracies in initial assumptions and policies, and mine action officials now realize these should be amended (e.g., VBMAC should not have been created as both a regulator and an operator).

National Stakeholders

National stakeholders focused more on the work that has been done to get VNMAP operating, and mentioned the following:

- Progress on VLIS and MRE
- Establishment of a high-profile steering committee
- Transfers from the state budget to provinces to fund demining projects

The Ministry of Planning and Investment also emphasized that mine action is a priority for both official development assistance and in its priorities issued to donors. Ministry officials also spoke of plans for 2013 that awaited Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's approval. These include the following:

- Establishment of a national regulatory office
- Division of VBMAC to create a new Viet Nam Mine Action Coordination Centre (VNMACC) and a separate civilian operator
- Appointment of qualified personnel to VNMACC on a full-time basis and to a new location

Assuming approval is obtained, these plans address the majority of the concerns raised by stakeholders.

Conclusions

While VNMAP's approval was widely welcomed, the pace of implementation disappointed many stakeholders. The division of roles and responsibilities among MoD, VBMAC and the proposed regulatory office remains unclear to most stakeholders, and this represents a significant concern to those involved. Contributing to disappointing progress on other measures envisaged, the delay in providing adequate human and financial resources to the mine action center is a core problem. However, better progress can be expected in 2013 and beyond, assuming that the plans and budgets already prepared are approved. ☺

See endnotes page 64



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1. In Vietnam, this war is called the American War.
2. "Mine Action in Vietnam and GICHD Support." *GICHD*. <http://bit.ly/10sSKJm>. Accessed 1 May 2013.
3. "Vietnam." *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*. <http://bit.ly/Qqgaro>. Accessed 29 March 2013.
4. Interview with Deputy Commander of Engineering Command, Sr. Col. Tuan, 5 October 2012.
5. "Vietnam Unexploded Ordnance and Landmine Impact Assessment & Rapid Technical Response in Six Provinces of Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue and Quang Ngai." *Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation*, Hanoi, 2009. <http://bit.ly/17Xqfdw>. Accessed 13 May 2013.