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Afghanistan's Landmine-removal Extension Request

Recent conflicts, lack of funding and limited information about mined areas in Afghanistan has prevented the country from meeting its 2013 deadline of becoming mine impact-free. The Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan, along with the Afghan government, submitted a plan proposing to extend Afghanistan's landmine-removal deadline to 2023. The extension request included almost 200 pages of details regarding mine history and future plans.

by Justyna Pietralik [United Nations Mine Action Service]

Following 23 years of clearance efforts, Afghanistan continues to work toward becoming mine impact-free. Collaborating closely with the Afghan government, the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan developed an action plan to remove all known hazards by 2023. The plan is part of the government's request to the Secretariat of the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction* (Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMBC) to extend Afghanistan's 2013 deadline to clear its territory of all anti-personnel mines to 2023.

The APMBC obligates states to remove all AP mines from mined areas within 10 years of becoming State Parties. Afghanistan became a State Party in 2003 and worked toward a deadline of 2013 for the clearance of all AP mines. The magnitude of the mine problem in Afghanistan, however, coupled with ongoing conflict, lack of funding and poor availability of data on mined areas, has prevented Afghanistan from achieving its initial deadline.

"If the conflict had stopped, and had we had sufficient funding, we would have resolved the landmine problem by now," said Mohammad Sediq Rashid, head of the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan. "To date, Afghanistan has made great efforts to address the problem. Despite insecurity and funding constraints, we have achieved a lot. Thousands of minefields have been cleared; roads have been opened. As a result, mines and other explosive remnants of war are no longer a crisis."¹

Still, large tracts of the countryside remain contaminated. More than one million Afghans still live within 500 m (547 yd) of landmine-contaminated areas and hazards covering more than 500 sq km (193 sq mi) remain. Of Afghanistan's 34 prov-

inces, only one is mine impact-free.² The presence of minefields often constrain large-scale development projects, such as the planned railway between Kabul and Mazar and hydroelectric dam projects in Kunar, Laghman and Takhar provinces. Presently, 43 development projects planned by the Afghan government will require some mine action intervention.

Extension Request

Work on Afghanistan's extension request began in September 2011 after initial discussions with the Implementation Support Unit of the APMBC. Two teams formed: One team drafted the submission document consisting of 18 chapters spanning almost 200 pages, covering all aspects of mine action in Afghanistan including history, progress to date and quality assurance. A second team created the work plan, which sets the course of action for the final 10 years of mine action in Afghanistan.

MACCA staff, the Afghan government's Department of Mine Clearance and the implementing partners met weekly to develop a work plan.³ They parceled out work among team members to ensure that all aspects of the plan, such as the clearance rate and all key plans, had every team member's support. To that end, it was highly successful. Afghanistan submitted the only extension request signed by its national and international implementers, an action not usually taken. Seven of the program's biggest partners, accounting for more than 90 percent of humanitarian demining work in Afghanistan, signed the extension request.³

The Afghan government contributed significantly. The Department of Mine Clearance and the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority facilitated the process of submission, shepherding the document through

ministries and ensuring the government understood the request and its obligations. They were invaluable in explaining what had happened in the program's early years, of which few records remain.

Collecting Data

"We were advised that the analyzing group expected to see the history of every minefield, when it was found, how big it was, when it was surveyed and cleared," said Abigail Hartley, U.N. Mine Action Service programme manager for mine action in Afghanistan. "Given that we have over 20,000 hazards, that was a massive task—particularly since IMSMA [Information Management System for Mine Action] was only introduced to Afghanistan in 2004."⁴

Until 2004, all mine action information in the country was housed in a FoxPro database, which had limited abilities to analyze data.⁵ When the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining introduced the IMSMA database, the entire dataset was migrated.⁶ However, a broad gap existed between the quality of data gathered prior to 2004 and data entered afterward. IMSMA had integrated geospatial information system software, offered easy import and export of data and had powerful computational abilities. This provided significantly more safeguards and quality checks than its predecessor.

The biggest challenge for the extension request team was sorting through this vast store of mine action information spanning more than 20 years. In addition to information about the hazard itself, contextual data, such as surrounding settlements, slope and snow coverage were examined, allowing for a multi-dimensional understanding of the hazard and how best to address it. In all, almost 1.5 million bits of data were analyzed.



Despite sustained clearance efforts, large tracks of the Afghan countryside remain contaminated.

All photos courtesy of Jacob Smikin.



Demining efforts in Afghanistan were launched more than two decades ago.

“We were very cautious,” said Mohammad Wakil, MACCA’s chief of staff. “The data had to be correct and cross-checked with all implementing partners. As part of the process, we cleaned the entire database.”⁷ Wakil said the request for an extension relied on changing the way mine action was planned and funded. Previously, demining nongovernmental organizations applied to have the costs of their teams covered and subsequently based their work plans around the number of teams deployed. Now, however, a system of projectization allows NGOs to deliver projects with clearly defined outcomes in specific locations. After the data analysis in IMSMA was complete, hazards were divided into 314 discrete, manageable projects.

Clearance Plan

The clearance plan will be the program’s blueprint for the next decade of operations in Afghanistan. It will be tested every six months to ensure that key assumptions still hold. The recently launched Non-technical Survey, also part of the extension request, will take two years and survey every Afghan village. Over the course of the survey, some hazards may be cancelled or reduced in size, while previously unreported hazards may be discovered.

The clearance plan employs a newly designed hazard-ranking system to help prioritize projects. The program already had an impact classification mechanism in place to evaluate hazards, but the work plan team refined it further, devising the Ottawa Ranking system. It assigns a rank of 1 to 6 for each hazard, with 1 designating the highest priority. A typical hazard with an Ottawa Ranking of 1 has had recent victims (within the last 24 months) and is blocking vital infrastructure, such as agricultural land or a residential area.

Afghanistan’s extension request was submitted in March 2012. The analyzing group had until November to present its questions, and, based on these, the document may be amended and resubmitted as a final draft. At the States Parties meeting in March 2013, the request is expected to be approved, effective 1 April 2013, triggering implementation of the 10-year clearance plan.

Response

The response to the extension request so far is overwhelmingly positive. Speaking at the meeting of States Parties in Geneva in May 2012—where the Afghan request was a highlight of discussions—UNMAS’s new director, Agnes Marcaillou, said the clearance plan was “a model of collective efforts.”⁸



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The International Campaign to Ban Landmines announced it was “the most comprehensive and ambitious request yet submitted.” The organization suggests it should be used as a role model for other mine-affected countries: “It is not a national authority or bureaucratic wish list but a pragmatic program.”⁸

The total budget for the 10-year period, which will ensure the clearance of all known hazards, along with other activities such as survey, coordination and project management, is US\$647.5 million. The work plan is fully achievable by the end of the extension period, provided that funds are available on time and that the security situation allows for implementation countrywide. The work plan is based on a

conservative estimate of clearance outputs and of future donor contributions. If the project receives more funds than projected, year on year, clearance may finish in fewer than 10 years.

As a result of the process, Abigail Hartley says: “We have full confidence in the plan and its feasibility, and a better coordination and planning process with our implementers. We know the extent of the problem, we are surveying to confirm it and we have a system to address it.”⁹

See endnotes page 66



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1. Author's personal interview with Mohammad Sediq Rashid. Kabul, Afghanistan. June and July 2012.
2. "UNAMA Mandated to Support Afghan-led Elections." *Afghanistan and the United Nations* (2012). <http://tinyurl.com/c6klvxn>. Accessed 1 August 2012.
3. The implementing partners include the Organization for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR), Demining Agency for Afghanistan (DAFA), Mine Detection Center (MDC), Mine Clearance Planning Agency (MCPA) and Afghan Technical Consultants (ATC). In addition, two international nongovernmental organizations were involved: Danish Demining Group (DDG) and HALO Trust.
4. Author's personal interview with Abigail Hartley. Kabul, Afghanistan. June and July 2012.
5. FoxPro is a Database Management System (DBMS) and a commercially available database software.
6. "Upgrading to IMSMA-NG." *Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining*. <http://tinyurl.com/bm2e6gw>. Accessed 2 August 2012.
7. Author's personal interview with Mohammad Wakil. Kabul, Afghanistan. June and July 2012.
8. Personal notes from author's colleague, Mohammad Wakil, summarizing the meetings in Geneva.