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## Congolese Soldiers Learn to Combat UXO and Mines

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# Congolese Soldiers Learn to Combat UXO and Mines

This article focuses on how U.S. Africa Command (U.S. AFRICOM) supports the Democratic Republic of the Congo in carrying out its mine-action objectives by providing train-the-trainer and supervisory services and mine-action equipment to the DRC.

by Staff Sergeant Amanda McCarty [ U.S. AFRICOM ]



Sergeant Ramazani Muhamadi, a Congolese military engineer with the 9th Region, instructs soldiers on proper wear of personal protective equipment during a three-week humanitarian mine-action training in Kisangani, DRC.

*All photos courtesy of AFRICOM and the author.*

“African solutions to African problems,” a motto for U.S. Africa Command engagement in Africa, stands as a reminder that helping African militaries self-sustain their operations is often just as important as the activity itself. Recent mine-action training in the Democratic Republic of the Congo provided an example of how U.S. AFRICOM incorporates sustainability into its activities with African partners. AFRICOM

teamed with Congolese Armed Forces soldiers as part of the command's humanitarian mine-action program to help re-establish a mine-action company at Camp Base in Kisangani, DRC.

In coordination with the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), the command began its mission to assist the DRC's *Forces Armées de la République*



Congolese soldiers use the buddy system to help each other put on their protective suits before heading into the mine-exercise field.

*Démocratique du Congo* after the country requested support in September 2009. AFRICOM conducted eight missions since then to build and train a company to conduct mine-action activities including identification, removal, destruction and protection against mines, unexploded ordnance and explosive remnants of war.

“The program has been a success,” says Jack Holly, U.S. AFRICOM’s HMA Branch Chief. “The command’s engagement with the FARDC Engineer Company has fostered a unique relationship instituting a viable program in demining, explosive ordnance disposal and explosive remnants of war operations.”

To develop a self-sustaining program, AFRICOM trained a select group of Congolese engineers as mine-action instructors; these Congolese instructors in turn train other Congolese soldiers. After years of conflicts in and around the country, this group is the first DRC national asset to be trained to support demining and ERW removal. During an

AFRICOM-supervised training mission in March 2011, the Congolese engineers conducted all the instruction. Verbal and hands-on training covered proper handling techniques, protective gear and safety use, identification and clearing/detonation of UXO and mines.

In addition to supervising the new Congolese mine-action trainers, AFRICOM provided equipment valued at US\$125,000 to use as training aids for demining and explosive-ordnance-removal instruction. Congolese soldiers teaching the course during this latest mission provided demonstrations on personal protective equipment, metal detectors, hand tools and other equipment.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Andrew Giacomucci from Mobile Unit 8, operating with Task Force 68, Naval Station Rota, Spain, led the 21-day training mission. “I have been impressed with what I have seen,” he says. Giacomucci adds that he thought the sustained mine-action training and involvement helped strengthen the bond between the U.S. and Congolese militaries.

“Partnering is essential to the success of this program; no one organization can do it alone,” Holly says. “We are partnering with the U.S. Department of State [PM/WRA], Handicap International—an international nongovernmental organization—and the United Nations Mine Action Centre and the DRC Center for Demining, both in Kinshasa.” PM/WRA provided support to AFRICOM via Handicap International in the form of a grant for \$15,775. This funding was used to purchase equipment that assisted AFRICOM’s training program. PM/WRA’s grant will support AFRICOM’s four training missions in 2011 and 2012, while also helping HI stay engaged in Kasai-Oriental province. Although Handicap International did not provide funding, they did contribute to the AFRICOM project in Kisangani with in-kind support in the form of training/awareness programs on humanitarian demining and the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on their Destruction’s* five pillars, as well as deconstruction components for explosives.

Contamination varies throughout DRC’s provinces; however, mine threats are believed to be significantly less than that of ERW. AFRICOM’s HMA training teaches identification and safe disposal of both. “Unexploded ordnance is the leading cause of injuries in Africa, surpassing that of landmines,” Holly points out.

Kisangani, located in the northeastern province of Orientale, has had significant problems with mines and UXO as a result of successive wars and conflicts during the last two decades. About the size of Spain, the province has a population of 5.5 million, and suspected landmine/UXO-contaminated land totals about 8 million square meters (1,977 acres). This area represents

more than half of the DRC’s remaining hazardous areas, making Kisangani a prime location for a mine-action company. The Congolese Minister of Defense has expressed his intent for Camp Base to become a national demining training center, capable of assisting the population and working with the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Center in Kinshasa to conduct other operations in-country.

“HMA demand in Africa, not only in the DRC, is growing, and more assistance is needed,” says Holly. U.S. AFRICOM also conducts HMA training with militaries in Burundi, Chad, Kenya, Mozambique and Namibia, and is expanding operations to Mauritania and Tanzania next year. “AFRICOM’s HMA program has expanded to the point that we’ve exceeded our capacity to sustain our current level of engagement,” Holly points out. “We won’t be able to expand into new areas without passing the planning and execution phases of the program to [U.S. AFRICOM’s] component commands.”<sup>1</sup>

The goal of HMA activities—specifically in the DRC—is enabling and helping equip the Congolese with the skills and abilities to safely address their mine problems, something the AFRICOM HMA coordinator Jack Holly said the Congolese are well prepared for.

The final training with the mine-action company at Camp Base was completed 29 July 2011; however, Holly says this is not the end of AFRICOM’s engagement. “U.S. Africa Command’s HMA program will continue to support this important project into the future, promoting mine action, engagement and mentoring the FARDC HMA instructors.”<sup>2</sup>

See endnotes page 83



Staff Sergeant Amanda McCarty is a journalist in the U.S. AFRICOM Public Affairs office in Stuttgart, Germany. She is responsible for keeping a global audience informed about the command’s mission of providing U.S. military support to U.S. government policy in Africa, including military partnerships with 54 African nations. She enlisted in the Air Force in 2002 and has served in a variety of positions within the Public Affairs career field, including a tour of duty in Afghanistan, where she worked in a joint public-affairs position on the staff at Headquarters International Security Assistance Force, NATO.

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