UNIFIL Peacekeeping in Southern Lebanon

Christina Greene
United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre

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Dear Editor,

I was looking over Issue 14.5 of the ‘The Journal of ERW and Mine Action’ yesterday and Mr. Khalid Ibrahim Hamdani’s article, “Mine Action in North Jidda,” (pages 44–46). I was quite concerned about the chance of mine-related incidents in this area. My concern was raised when I saw he was not wearing his safety glasses properly. In the photo on page 45, open sparks are clearly flying from his hand-held grinding wheel. Although his body is hiding the sparks, it is quite clear that his eyes are uncovered, wearing his safety glasses on his forehead. If a spark were to hit him in the face or eye, he would be blinded for life. I am working with him for his safety, and I know that he is not wearing his safety glasses properly. In the photo on page 45, open sparks are clearly flying from his hand-held grinding wheel. Although his body is hiding the sparks, it is quite clear that his eyes are uncovered, wearing his safety glasses on his forehead. If a spark were to hit him in the face or eye, he would be blinded for life. I am working with him for his safety, and I know that he is not wearing his safety glasses properly. In the photo on page 45, open sparks are clearly flying from his hand-held grinding wheel. Although his body is hiding the sparks, it is quite clear that his eyes are uncovered, wearing his safety glasses on his forehead. If a spark were to hit him in the face or eye, he would be blinded for life.

I encourage dialogue on safe work practices for all workers in mine action. I would like to ask that you Mr. Khalid Ibrahim Hamdani please contact the victim assistance program under the national mine action center and ask them to insist that workers’ cover their eyes with their safety goggles while working and that electrical cords are safely placed. I have learned that the workers pictured do not have protective legs. Could the MAC help with that issue?

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Criticisms conducted road construction. UNIFIL and MAG (Mines Advisory Group) conducted was conducted by SRSA and UNIFIL in 2009. In 2010, UNIFIL and MAG (Mines Advisory Group) conducted joint operations on the LAF road north of the Blue Line. The clearance and reconstruction of the LAF road was conducted by SRSA and UNIFIL in 2009. In 2010, UNIFIL and MAG (Mines Advisory Group) conducted joint operations on the LAF road north of the Blue Line. MAG provided mechanical and manual clearance and UNIFIL construction units (Italian and Portuguese) conducted road construction.

Criticisms

The role of visiting military forces in mine action has been greatly debated. The 2003 Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining report on *The Role of the Military in Mine Action* analysed many of the strengths and weaknesses of military actors performing mine action and specifically pointed out shortcomings of UNIFIL’s demining operations in conducting critical coordination and complying with IMAS. Thanks to the coordination role played by UNMCC and the dialogue within UNIFIL, many aspects of UNIFIL troop-contributing countries’ demining operations have been improved and problems resolved by encouraging the use of one standard for all troop-contributing countries and through assistance and monitoring of training and accreditation with the Lebanon Mine Action Center. Greater coordination among UNIFIL, LMAC and other mine-action actors in Southern Lebanon has increased the efficiency and safety of operations on many occasions in 2007, 2009 and 2010 on the Blue Line and for the Lebanese Armed Forces patrol road north of the Blue Line.

One of the main criticisms levied against operations by visiting militaries has been the militaries’ adherence to their own operational guidelines instead of compliance with International Mine Action Standards. Troop-contributing countries have sometimes perceived a distinction between humanitarian demining and operational demining in support of peacekeeping operations and have argued that peacekeeping operations are not humanitarian activities and therefore not subject to IMAS. The United Nations has made a firm point that demining operations are to be in accordance with IMAS. Coordination, training and support provided by UNMCC have now ensured that all troop-contributing countries in Lebanon are accredited to IMAS and to the Lebanese Mine Action Standards. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations is currently in negotiations to ensure that all troop-contributing countries are contractually mandated to receive IMAS accreditation and provide IMAS-approved equipment. It is worth noting that the troop-contributing countries are conducting operational tasks but are using humanitarian standards of operations.

Challenges/Suggested Solutions

While peacekeeping demining operations have achieved great strides in improving performance on the ground as well as increasing coordination with national authorities, UNIFIL demining operations still face challenges. As of October 2010, teams from Belgium, China, France, Italy and Spain were deployed. The troop-contributing countries’ teams within UNIFIL are on an operational rotation between four and 10 months. This means that, as often as every four months, team members are replaced and the team is required to undergo training and accreditation. As a result, there has been a lack of institutional knowledge retained within the teams. It has been suggested that a training team remain behind for the incumbent team and the command structure for the incumbent team arrive prior to the mission to maintain institutional knowledge between current and incumbent team(s). Some troop-contributing countries have already started adopting such measures.

The UNMCC does provide a center of institutional knowledge within UNIFIL; however, a longer rotation by peacekeeping teams would increase their efficiency and familiarity with the mine and explosive remnants-of-war situation in South Lebanon.

UNMCC has provided a much-needed support role for the troop-contributing countries’ demining teams in coordination with the UNIFIL Combat Engineering Section; however, disagreements arise between the civilian UNMCC and the military staff from UNIFIL whenever UNIFIL perceives infringement upon its own military chain of command. Coordination of the demining peacekeepers’ troop-contributing countries requires sensitivity to the fact that militaries operate to a strict chain of command and are not as flexible as other mine-action organizations. On the other hand, UNIFIL must also be open to receiving instruction and support from coordinating bodies such as UNMCC and LMAC that have a wealth of expertise and experience to offer for such operations. UNIFIL’s mine-action operations have demonstrated that demining troop-contributing countries are able to provide a significant and unique role within peacekeeping operations and within mine action. While many of their tasks are not necessarily humanitarian in nature, they contribute to stabilization of insecure regions. To ensure the successful implementation of troop-contributing countries’ demining operations, the existence of a coordinating body such as UNMCC is critical to ensure coordination with national authorities and adherence to IMAS/LMAS, as well as the continuation of institutional knowledge for operations, quality assurance, training and accreditation.

Christina Greene has worked in mine action for seven years, holding positions in Washington D.C., Sudan and, most recently, in Lebanon as the Programme Officer with the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre. Greene holds a Master of Arts in International Affairs from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

E-mail: cy_greene@hotmail.com

An accredited Spanish mine-clearance team in 2010.