

# Sri Lanka Works Toward a Mine-free Nation

This article discusses Sri Lanka’s steps to demine its land, educate its citizens on landmine and unexploded-ordnance dangers, and offer survivor-assistance services. Sri Lanka’s national mine-action program is building on previous mine-action work done by the government and humanitarian organizations by presenting a workshop on demining issues, developing a mine-action center and improving partnerships with concerned organizations.

by Vidya Abhayagunawardena [ Freelance Researcher ]



A commemoration ceremony for the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Sri Lanka.  
Photo courtesy of Sarvodaya.

In 2009, Sri Lanka ended nearly three decades of protracted conflict. Unfortunately, the country was also left with thousands of landmines and pieces of unexploded ordnance, especially in the North and East, which has posed a major threat for the island nation’s people, environment and biodiversity.

Humanitarian mine action began in Sri Lanka in 1997 with the implementation of a mine-risk-education program, coordinated by UNICEF and the United Nations Development Programme.<sup>1</sup> The next year, the government partnered with UNDP to conduct some clearance and Technical Surveys, but an offi-

cial mine-action project did not begin until July 1999. This U.N. project implemented mine-awareness activities, Technical Surveys, emergency clearance and the gathering of a mine-action database. However, as mine-action operations proceeded, mines were continuing to be laid. This made a systematic clearance of

Sri Lanka difficult, and when conflict escalated in 2000, the mine-action project was suspended.<sup>2</sup>

Since 2002, after a formal cease-fire agreement, the Sri Lankan government and the international community have undertaken a large-scale mine-action program in the northern and eastern regions. Although the government and program partners work tirelessly to speed up the demining process, they estimate that another 10 years or more are needed to clear the mine-contaminated land. As a result, Sri Lanka struggles to progress in infrastructure development, resettlement of internally displaced persons, operation of social services, restoration of livelihoods in conflict-affected areas and the establishment of Sri Lanka as a mine-free country.

## Mine-action Workshop

UNICEF facilitated a Technical Working Group workshop in Sri Lanka in August 2010. Key government entities that participated included the Ministry of Economic Development, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Services, Sri Lankan Army’s Humanitarian Demining Unit, and Social Departments of the Northern and Eastern Provincial Councils. Partner nongovernmental organizations such as Community Trust Fund, Handicap International, Motivation, Rural Development Foundation, Sarvodaya and Social Organizations Networking for Development also attended the workshop. Participants developed new strategies to educate people in mine-safe behavior, how best to ensure support for victims of landmines and other explosive devices, and how to strengthen mine-action advocacy. Discussion topics focused on victim assistance; coordination among the mine-action stakeholders; how MRE can prevent injury and fatalities; and the need for MRE prior to safe resettlement and development in the north and east.

## SL National Mine Action Centre Emerges

The Sri Lankan government, in a recent Cabinet decision, approved the setup of the Sri Lanka National Mine Action Centre under the Ministry of Economic Development, a coordinating body of the Presidential Task Force, as a new stepping stone toward a mine-free Sri Lanka. As SLNMAC National Director Money Ranathunge said at the TWG workshop, the center’s mission is “To develop and implement a sustainable national mine action program able to plan, coordinate, implement and monitor all aspects of mine action in Sri Lanka and mobi-



In Jaffna, Sarvodaya uses drama to teach MRE.  
Photo courtesy of SLNMAC/UNICEF.

lize the required resources to make Sri Lanka free from the threat of landmines/ERW [explosive remnants of war] through education, threat prevention and elimination in accordance with SLNMAC.” This center’s establishment will enhance Sri Lanka’s mine-action efforts and encourage concerned parties to efficiently partner with the mine-action program in Sri Lanka. SLNMAC plans to prepare a national victim-assistance strategy in the coming months with the support of UNICEF, which will help coordinate work among stakeholders and provide technical support for strategizing victim-assistance efforts. The strategy is expected to call for ensuring that existing health-care and social-service systems, rehabilitation programs, and legislative and policy frameworks are adequate to meet





Technical Working Group participants.  
Photo courtesy of the author.

all citizens' needs—including landmine survivors and deceased victims' family members.

#### Demining Progress

Currently, nine organizations are demining in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern parts: the Sri Lankan Army's Humanitarian Demining Unit, The HALO Trust, Danish Demining Group, *Fondation Suisse de Déminage*, MAG (Mines Advisory Group), Sarvatra, Horizon, Milinda Moragoda Institute for Peoples' Empowerment and Delvon Assistance for Social Harmony. The Ministry of Economic Development released information in September 2010 stating that, according to the Sri Lankan Army, military and humanitarian demining had cleared 366,870 mines since mine-action efforts began in 1999. As of 31 August 2010, recently conducted Technical Surveys in the north and existing data from the east revealed that mines/ERW still contaminate 552 square kilometers (213 square miles). Clearing the most af-

ected areas by 2020 to allow people to begin rebuilding their livelihoods from the land is LNMAC's current goal. Factoring in the annual clearance average since 2002 of 171 square kilometers (66 square miles), however, indicates that the required time to clear the remaining areas would be nearly 15 years. To reach SLNMAC's clearance goal in the 10-year time frame, increased contributions of human resources, as well as physical and financial support will be required.

According to the United Nations Development Programme, mine-action agencies are struggling to keep up with the sudden increase in demands for mine and UXO clearance, MRE and survivor-assistance services. Agencies are working to expand their technical capacities to meet the needs, and UNDP is stepping up by adding more staff to its district mine-action offices, hoping that will satisfy complex and growing demands for coordination and management. Mine-action agencies are also looking

for new opportunities to partner with the Sri Lankan Army, government authorities and nongovernmental organizations to speed up demining and post-clearance recovery programs.

#### MRE Campaigns

Sri Lanka's Ministry of Education has taken a broader approach to MRE with UNICEF's support. One important step in this approach was educating the educators; principals and selected teachers from all northern and eastern schools have received MRE training. Numerous schools in the most affected areas are taking a creative approach to MRE: Educational messages are displayed through wall paintings; activities such as dramas and art competitions are held; and messages printed on stationery, schoolbags and water bottles are distributed. To ensure MRE's sustainability, the MoE will include MRE in next year's school curriculum as well.

The MoE is not the only entity delivering MRE; national NGOs in 2009 reached more than 250,000

people in 61 divisional secretariats<sup>3</sup> and IDP camps with community-based MRE. As of 31 December 2010, the MRE program had reached 392,540 people (87,326 men, 99,540 women, 102,179 boys and 103,495 girls). MRE recipients demonstrated mine-safe behavior by reporting 672 suspected dangerous objects and hazardous areas during 2010. The program hopes to reduce civilian landmine casualties, which included 123 killed, 453 injured and 734 unknown from 1999–2009, according to the *Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor*.<sup>4</sup>

The Sri Lanka Police Service also hopes to strengthen, expand and sustain countrywide MRE. The SL Police Service is currently being trained to deliver MRE. Using the SL Police Service to deliver MRE has some advantages: It employs bilingual police officers (there is a widespread police presence throughout the country) and it can easily mobilize its people and hold officers accountable for achieving maximum results.

In addition to current MRE campaigns, Sri Lanka needs sustainable MRE campaigns that will lead to total landmine and ERW eradication. Utilizing social marketing strategies can draw religious and community-based organizations to partner with government and current MRE organizations in this long-term goal. Temples, churches, mosques and centers for community-based organizations can deliver life-saving messages by becoming voluntary MRE centers in their respective communities. The private sector has a pivotal role to play if it uses its corporate social responsibility programs to support Sri Lanka's mine-action program. Even the Sri Lankan Army's HDU participates in

educating the public regarding mine dangers. Public participation and support at all levels is needed; government and partner organizations alone cannot educate all citizens.

#### Survivor Assistance

Sri Lanka's survivor-assistance strategy will take a rights-based approach, as specified in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines framework and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As per U.N. policy, concerned parties will ensure that activities benefit all people with disabilities, including mine survivors and the families of those killed by mines. The Sri Lankan government and concerned parties need to take a leading role in survivor assistance and mobilize the long-term resources. The outcome of these coordinated efforts by various stakeholders will be that survivors can access quality and sustainable medical, social and economic rehabilitation services, and will be empowered to advocate for their rights.

#### Future Steps

Sri Lanka is now free from war's threat, but its land must still be freed from the lingering dangers of landmines and UXO. Beyond implementing the national mine-action plan, the time has come for the Sri Lankan government to accede to the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction* (also known as the AP Mine Ban Convention or APMBC), which would support the goals of the Campaign to Ban Landmines in Sri Lanka. By acceding to the APMBC, Sri Lanka would also receive more assistance from the in-

ternational community. Hope for campaign support was seen in *The National Strategy for Mine Action in Sri Lanka*,<sup>5</sup> released in September 2010 by the Ministry of Economic Development. The strategy encourages grassroots movements and senior decision-makers in government, security forces and civil society groups to support the ban.

Sri Lanka is making progress toward becoming a mine-free nation, which could be a good example for other countries. Further demining efforts will ensure that humans and animals can walk anywhere in Sri Lanka in a few years' time without fear of landmines and UXO. ♦

see endnotes page 83



Vidya Abhayagunawardena received a Bachelor of Business Administration from the University of Northwood (United States). He holds a diploma in marketing from The Chartered Institute of Marketing (United Kingdom) and a mass-media diploma from Media Foundation in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Currently he is enrolled in a postgraduate master's program in development studies at the University of Colombo. Abhayagunawardena works as a freelance researcher in socioeconomic development and is a campaigner for the Sri Lanka Campaign to Ban Landmines.

Vidya Abhayagunawardena  
No. 69, Gregory's Road  
Colombo 7 / Sri Lanka  
Tel: +94 112 682380  
Mobile: +94 77 355 9878  
E-mail: vidyampa@hotmail.com