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## The Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan

Mohammed Haider Reza  
MAPA

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# The Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan

The Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan, coordinated by the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan, faces a unique set of challenges in combating the national mine/explosive-remnants-of-war contamination problem. The ongoing war and changing political climate force the country to adapt its mine-action plan to meet new demands as they emerge. The following summary of MAPA's activities highlights these challenges and their implications for the continued humanitarian effort in Afghanistan.

by Dr. Mohammed Haider Reza [ MACCA ]

The Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan is one of the oldest and largest mine-action programs in the world.<sup>1</sup> Coordinated by the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan, more than 10,000 individuals in commercial and noncommercial entities work in Afghanistan's mine-action field.<sup>2</sup> MAPA's implementing partners vary in size from large organizations with thousands of employees to smaller organizations with few personnel. MAPA covers all mine-action pillars,<sup>3</sup> including demining (survey, marking and clearance), mine-risk education, victim assistance and advocacy.

MAPA began in 1988 as a United Nations Office of Humanitarian Affairs coordinated operation based in Peshawar, Pakistan. After the Taliban's fall in 2001, the new government of Afghanistan delegated program responsibility to the United Nations to coordinate mine-action activities in the country. Since its inception, MAPA has grown in size and expanded its area of operation to every mine-affected province. In 2000, MAPA received only US\$17 million<sup>4</sup> in funding; since 2001 the overall budget of bilateral and multilateral funding has averaged \$140 million per annum.

The additional funding received since 2001 has allowed for some significant achievements. For example, the number of victims has been reduced by 75 percent from its high point in 2002, when the International Committee of the

Red Cross reported more than 1,200 casualties from landmines, unexploded ordnance and cluster munitions.<sup>5</sup> More than 12,000 minefields have been cleared and the land has been made available for productive use. The initial priorities were to clear the areas blocking access to schools, universities, hospitals, residential areas and farmlands. Although many of these priorities have been completed, as more refugees return and resettle in Afghanistan and the country slowly works toward building a modern infrastructure, mine action will continue to play a crucial role in the country's post-war development, such as in the clearance that was necessary to allow electricity lines to run from Tajikistan to Kabul. Despite the fact that the amount of funding received has increased, current funding is insufficient for Afghanistan, as it is in many other countries, if Ottawa Convention and Afghan Compact deadlines are to be met on time.

As the number of known minefields is reduced, MACCA works with implementing partners to annually review the planning criteria against which priorities are set and publishes an Integrated Operational Framework<sup>6</sup> detailing these priorities. This handbook outlines mine-action sector policies, details data analysis of the current hazard areas and contains a compilation of the aspirations of all implementing partners. Although more than 600 square kilometers (231.7 square miles)

of contaminated area remain, MAPA can eliminate high-impact hazards relatively quickly, clearing approximately 80 square kilometers (30.9 square miles) each year. Furthermore, having cleared the high-impact minefields in the last 20 years, MACCA and its implementing partners must begin to consider how to restructure over time in order to meet the next decade's challenges. For example, 40 percent of the existing contamination covers relatively large areas, with low-density contamination of minimal-metal anti-tank mines outside urban centers. Although once not considered a priority, the impact of these minefields on Afghanistan is increasing as the country's infrastructure and industry develop, particularly those associated with natural resources. Therefore, the priority for clearance of these sites must also adapt.



Mine-risk education is now taught by 17,000 trained Ministry of Education teachers throughout Afghanistan.  
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAPA

## Afghanistan's Goals and End States

In 2003, Afghanistan became a signatory to the Ottawa Convention which commits the country to:

- Clear all emplaced anti-personnel mines by 2013
- Destroy all known AP-mine stockpiles by 2007 (this goal was achieved in October 2007)
- Provide mine-risk education to Afghans and assist mine survivors

In addition, mine-action goals were included in the Afghan Compact, namely:

- Land area contaminated by mines and ERW will be reduced by 70 percent by March 2011.
- All stockpiled AP mines will be located and destroyed by March 2007.

## Future Goals

The Afghan government's end-state vision is "a country free from landmines and explosive remnants of war, where people and communities live in a safe environment conducive to national development, and where landmine and ERW survivors are fully integrated in the society and thus have their rights and needs recognized and fulfilled."<sup>7</sup>

In order to realize the end-state vision, the following end goals must be achieved:

**Goal 1: Demining.** The end goal for demining will be achieved when all known mine/ERW-contaminated areas have been cleared. Once this goal is achieved, an effective demining capability will continue and respond to unknown residual risk and raise public awareness. Mapping of cleared areas will be complete and accurate, and this data will be available as needed to the public and designated institutions. All post-clearance documentation will be complete, and all cleared land will be handed over in accordance with national standards.

**Goal 2: Mine/ERW-Risk Education.** The end goal for MRE will be achieved when a comprehensive and sustainable system is in place to educate and raise awareness throughout communities nationwide regarding the residual mines/ERW threats. This includes providing the public with sufficient information to recognize and report these suspicious items to the appropriate authorities.

**Goal 3: Stockpile Destruction.** The end goal for mine-stockpile destruction will be achieved when all known illegal, abandoned or otherwise unwanted munitions are destroyed or disposed of in addition to the AP-mine stockpile destruction already completed.

**Goal 4: Mine/ERW-Survivor Assistance.** The end goal for mine/ERW-survivor assistance



Creative mine-risk awareness techniques capture children's imaginations

will be achieved when mine/ERW survivors are reintegrated into Afghan society, with support provided through a national system that incorporates the rights and needs of people with disabilities.

**Goal 5: Advocacy and Coordination.** The end goal for advocacy and coordination will be achieved when relevant institutions and civil society cooperate and support the fulfillment of Afghan commitments to mine/ERW eradication and acknowledge the importance of mine action for communities and national development.

#### Meeting Milestones

Clearly, the challenge of reaching these end states in a country as contaminated as Afghanistan, and where conflict is ongoing in many areas, is a major one. Nonetheless, MAPA has met a number of significant milestones. In addition to the achievements highlighted earlier and the completion of stockpile destruction in line with the Afghan Compact goals, significant steps have been made in the areas of MRE and victim assistance. These are the two areas where the transition to the government of Afghanistan has made the most significant progress.

Mine/ERW-risk education messages have been incorporated into the national education curriculum, and more than 17,000 Ministry of Education teachers have been trained and provided the resources to teach MRE in classrooms. In order to ensure the sustainable quality of this teaching, Child Protection Officers in all provinces have been certified as

MRE trainers and also trained in monitoring and evaluation. MACCA currently supports this transition by providing the external monitoring and quality management of this system.

The Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled, and the Ministry of Public Health are leading victim/disability assistance activities, ensuring that landmine survivors and others with disabilities have their rights and needs addressed alongside all Afghan citizens.

#### Adapting to Change

Afghanistan faces particular challenges: the ongoing conflict in many parts of the country and the security threats presented by the widespread use of improvised explosive devices by Opposition Forces. In some communities, IEDs have been laid around villages in strategic patterns resembling traditional minefields, although without the density of the minefields laid by, for example, the Soviet Forces in the 1980s.

MAPA is dealing with the IED issue carefully to ensure it maintains its humanitarian neutrality and does not deal with IEDs in active conflict areas, which would lead to the deminers being perceived as parties to the conflict. However, it is important to heed the humanitarian imperative of clearing fields of abandoned IEDs in areas where conflict has been concluded.

As the nature of Afghanistan's armed conflict has changed over the last 20 years, MAPA has adapted and adjusted the delivery of mine-action services. In the last few years, community-based demining has been reintroduced to the program. Community-based demining projects are designed by the traditional Afghan implementing partners working closely with community *shuras* (or leadership committees) and the National Solidarity Programme Community Development Councils. These implementing partners work to develop projects that clear mines from the community by training local people from within that community. The traditional implementing partners also provide expert oversight and quality management.

The program is proving to be a successful way of enabling access to less secure areas as local recruitment and strong community involvement enhances deminers' security. An additional benefit of the community-based demining program is the economic boost provided to the small rural communities through the deminers' wages and other income, and through building rentals, etc., over a two-year period, which empowers them to take advantage of land development once it has been cleared.



A demining team walks toward a minefield.

#### The Road Ahead

Looking to the future, the program's major challenge is the requirement to make significant progress toward completely removing the impact of mines and ERW. There are a number of aspects to consider in order to achieve this objective: continued careful and strategic planning, investigation into new technologies (for example, those needed to clear very large minefields), continued adaptation of the program's structure, and a significant influx of donor funds.

#### Risks Remaining

MACCA believes no risk level is acceptable in areas communities regularly use. If the community fears certain areas, this will have a negative impact on its livelihood and ability to develop. Therefore, the fear must also be addressed. One of MACCA's 2010 tasks is to attempt to create a list of hazards that do not cause problems for communities and therefore could be managed in a different way.

In the same way that buried bombs from World War II are still discovered in Europe, the issue posed by ERW will be a problem in Afghanistan for many years to come. However, these concerns should be managed in a very different way, within the realm of a small national mine-action capacity by potentially partnering with the Afghan National Army and police.

#### Conclusion

MAPA and its partners have made tremendous strides toward ridding the country of landmines and other ERW, and in clearing the way for its country to develop and prosper. This progress has been achieved through increased focus and priority-based strategies, more funds to expand the workforce and support from the Afghan and international community. Many challenges lie ahead if the Afghan government's vision is to be achieved. That vision will require even greater commitment and focus than exhibited thus far. ♦

see endnotes page 81



**Dr. Mohammed Haider Reza** is the Programme Director of the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), which coordinates the work of more than 40 implementing partners working throughout one of the world's most mine-affected countries. Prior to joining the MACCA, Reza served as a Deputy Minister in the government of Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce and Industry. While Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, he was pivotal in Afghanistan becoming a signatory to the Ottawa Convention and ensuring mine action received the attention it deserved.

Dr. Mohammed Haider Reza  
Programme Director  
Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan  
PO Box 520  
Kabul / Afghanistan  
E-mail: haider.reza@macca.org.af  
Website: www.macca.org.af