Humanitarian Mine Action Training Mission to Sri Lanka

Amy Crockett
Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Sri Lanka is no stranger to landmine and explosive remnants of war contamination—nearly 30 years of hostilities between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Sri Lankan government have displaced thousands, impeded resettlement activities and hindered economic reconstruction. Although the two opposing sides entered into a 2002 cease-fire agreement, allowing for temporary land-clearance progress, the conflict rekindled in 2006, leading to further mine and ERW contamination. In May 2009, the government of Sri Lanka defeated the LTTE in a military campaign, but, as of spring 2010, estimates indicate nearly 300,000 IDPs remain. The mine/ERW contamination continues to hinder resettlement and land-clearance efforts, especially in the gravely affected Northern province.

Preparations
To assess how the United States could most effectively aid the Sri Lankan military with its humanitarian-demining efforts in northern Sri Lanka, the Humanitarian Mine Action Team, a group of six U.S. military and civilian demining professionals from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Pacific Command, Special Operations Command Pacific, and U.S. Army Pacific Command, visited the country in June 2009, meeting with government officials, military members and nongovernmental organization representatives. In response to the crisis, the U.S. Department of State also announced funding of US$6.6 million to support demining in the north. "Demining is a critical step in the process so that people can return to their homes, and we support the government of Sri Lanka’s commitment to return all those displaced quickly and safely," stated James R. Moore, U.S. Chargé d’Affaires in Sri Lanka.2

From 24 June through 1 August, the HMA team conducted a Requirements Determination Site Survey to finalize the training’s logistical planning, such as determining the curriculum components, trainees, and necessary equipment and how it would be obtained.3 Training was conducted in accordance with International Mine Action Standards.

Display board with different mine markings utilized in Sri Lanka.
HD training is not part of routine U.S. military training, so the team members needed up-to-date training from the Humanitarian De-mining Training Center before they were deployed.

The HMA team’s main goals:
1. Assess the capability and knowledge of the SLA’s HD program and instructors.
2. Provide instruction on the most recent IMAS while comparing and contrasting those with the SLA HD Standard Operating Procedures.
3. Update equipment important to the SLA Demining program for SLMSL use.

The mission was underway on 25 August 2009 after the team arrived in the west-coast city of Colombo, Sri Lanka, and met with U.S. Embassy officials to verify the demining equipment’s shipment to the country. Meanwhile, the team hoped to travel to a demining location in the north following the Requirements Determination Site Survey, but the mission was never able to conduct observations because Sri Lanka’s Ministry of Defense failed to approve the trip.

From late August to early September, the team began training the Sri Lankan deminers at the SLMSE in Embilipitiya, Sri Lanka. According to the HMA team’s brief, the HMA team and the SLA worked together to give students “separate, but not contradictory” views regarding HD. The curriculum encompassed lectures and practical exercises on the HD process and on new procedures and protocols. Instructors also required students to conduct a final, solo, scenario-based operation conducted after the project to discover what happened and why it happened, during and upon completion of each exercise.

Analyzing the Mission’s Success

The team encountered an obstacle when some of the ordered course items did not arrive on time at the program’s beginning. It overcame this hurdle by managing to collect enough equipment on short notice, demonstrating the SLA demining program’s ability to prepare and adapt at a moment’s notice. The HMA team and the SLA taught lessons in English and Sinhalese. A dynamic learning environment also contributed to the mission’s success.

RONCO, a civilian demining consultancy, had originally trained the Sri Lankan military engineers beginning in 2003 under a U.S. Department of State contract, and the Sri Lankans were still using this curriculum and procedures when the U.S. team arrived. Although the procedural standards RONCO developed for the SLankans followed the 2003 IMAS protocols, the U.S. team determined they no longer met the SLA’s needs or capabilities. The training the HMA team conducted helped the Sri Lankans initiate more cost-effective, practical and updated standard operating procedures.

Pleased with the HMA team’s instruction, Kumara expressed his intention to incorporate its curriculum and procedures into the SLA’s courses and demining operations. The brief’s overall assessment noted, “They demonstrated a sincere desire to improve the quality and efficiency of their program so that they could expedite the resettlement of their displaced people quickly but safely.”

According to the brief, at the training’s end, the team felt the students “were more than capable” of providing further HD training to deminers following IMAS and SLA SOPs and the team was “very impressed” with the safety and efficiency of the program. The HMA team determined after analysis and assessment of the capability and knowledge of the SLMSE training that it had met its first two goals of assessing the capability and knowledge of SLA’s HD program and instructors, as well as providing instruction on the most recent IMAS while comparing and contrasting those with the SLA HD standard operating procedures.

However, the HMA team encountered a conflict in reaching its last goal of updating the SLA’s demining equipment. Shipping and customs complications held up the arrival of some equipment. To ensure the appropriate delivery of the equipment, the team remained in contact with the SLA, and it all arrived in the end.

Continuing Efforts

In order to further aid Sri Lanka’s HD endeavours, the HMA team concluded that the SLA should continue receiving U.S. military training and support, noting that military-to-military interactions provided effective and realistic training. The HMA team credited the successful course to the SLA’s respect and admiration for the U.S. military. The trainers said they appreciated being able to interact with instructors who understand the military mindset and who could share real-life experiences with things like resource management and utilization in a military environment.

The SLA expressed the desire for additional training classes and for the return of the same instructors. It also requested training in quality assurance and management of HMA. The HMA team believes continued training would be in Sri Lanka’s best interest, considering the extent of the country’s landmine and IDP issues. Such training would ultimately ensure the implementation of the highest-quality standards, resulting in Sri Lanka becoming safer and, ultimately, safe from the impact of landmines.

See Endnotes, Page 82