Falkland-Malvinas Islands Update

Cory Kuklick
Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Following conflict between the United Kingdom and Argentina in 1982, close to 20,000 landmines1 contaminated the Falkland-Malvinas Islands. Despite numerous concerns, including those relating to the environmental effects of clearance activities, the United Kingdom is fulfilling its obligation to Article 5 of the Ottawa Convention to remove all anti-personnel landmines from the Islands. A pilot program for landmine removal began in late 2009, conducted by Battle Area Clearance and Training Equipment Consultants International Ltd, with program direction and quality control oversight by the newly created Falkland Island Demining Programme Office. It is expected that the results of the pilot program will help inform future clearance activities.

Background

Argentina laid at least 20,000 landmines, forming approximately 120 minefields, in 1982.2 Following Argentina’s surrender to the United Kingdom, clearance began immediately but quickly ended after several British service men were injured. The locations of the minefields were thoroughly recorded and fenced off, and no civilians have been killed or injured since the conflict ended.

Clearance operations did not again become a reality until 1998, when the U.K. signed the Ottawa Convention, which requires parties to remove all landmines on their sovereign territory. Questions were raised as to whether immediate removal was necessary,3 as the landmines posed little risk to islanders who had grown accustomed to their presence. In addition, a 2007 feasibility study conducted jointly by the U.K. and Argentina showed that clearance could cause environmental harm. The U.K. was granted an extension to its clearance obligations under the Ottawa Convention until 2019. Demining operations began in October 2009 with the establishment of FIDPO and a contract with BACTEC taking full account of the related environmental issues. According to Robin Swanson, FIDPO Programme Manager, there were concerns about the environment; permission from the Environmental Planning Department of the Falkland-Malvinas Islands was sought in advance of the demining operations. “We worked very closely with the Environmental Planning Department to reach a methodology and remediation plan that satisfied their needs and could be implemented by BACTEC,” he says.4

Current Activities

Clearance operations are focused on four suspect areas, each with different terrain types and with various mine and unexploded ordnance threat levels: Fox Bay East, Goose Green and two areas near Stanley, the capital of the Falkland-Malvinas Islands. An additional area at Surf Bay was selected for demining because a main road bisected it and there were concerns about accidents in that area. It was also because it contained over 1,000 mines representing 5 percent of the overall mines remaining on the island. Current demining activities are scheduled for completion by the end of May 2010. Following the pilot phase, the United Kingdom will better understand the logistical, environmental and technical challenges and will be able to inform future remediation phases.

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Furthermore, in accordance with the aging study funded by the U.S. Department of State and being done at James Madison University’s Center for International Stabilization and Recovery, Colin King, an explosive ordnance specialist, is collecting mines to help augment the information collected during the study. As the landmines in the Falklands have been embedded in sand for over 20 years, they have been exposed to time and a shifting environment, possibly altering their effectiveness. The results of the study could help determine if current demining techniques are compatible with the status of the landmines and whether any changes need to be made. It will be interesting to discover the condition of the mines that are removed.

Clearance Techniques

While the minefields were meticulously documented following the conflict’s end, the mines themselves are very complex and sophisticated. Described by Roger Gagen, BACTEC Project Manager, as the “Ferraris of landmines,” the mines contain a very small amount of metal, making them very hard to detect. The majority of the minefields lie in Surf Bay and Sapper Hill. Mines have been removed. It took 77 days to completely remove the landmines, which culminated in a public demonstration and impromptu football game to show confidence that the land is now mine-free. Many of BACTEC’s experts are Zimbabweans who have demined other sites across the world. In total, there were 37 Zimbabweans and 15 Lebanese experts worked to meet the pilot-project objectives, to ensure complete clearance of the land. A trauma medic supports each demining team, deminers take numerous breaks during their six-hour work shifts and are only allowed to consume alcohol on Saturday nights. These rules help keep deminers’ concentration high and the number of accidents low.

Conclusion

Three sites at Sapper Hill, Goose Green and Fox Bay have been completed, including the full quality-control sampling to International Mine Action Standards. The site at Surf Bay is almost complete pending location of the last mines buried deep in the sand dunes.

“We believe that this has been a very successful pilot phase which will be able to inform future projects, not only on the technical and environmental challenges of clearing landmines in the Falkland-Malvinas Islands,” says Swanson, “but also about the logistic and support challenges of operating within a limited infrastructure some distance from the U.K.”

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