Regional Cooperation: MDDC for SE Europe

As the refinement of mine-detection methods becomes more important, the Mine Detection Dog Center for South East Europe is answering the call, training dogs and handlers for effective detection. Working with animals is not easy, but the MDDC has been very successful in its operations. The organization focuses on regional cooperation, and has worked in areas such as Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Iraq, where it has proved to be an effective asset to mine detection and clearance.

by Marija Trlin [Mine Detection Dog Center for South East Europe]

It is a well-known fact that the region of Southeast Europe is heavily contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnance. Many mine-action centers in the region were established immediately after conflicts ended in the SEE countries. Mine action in Bosnia and Herzegovina started in 1996, and 13 years later, demining authorities there have grown into highly respectable organizations with the knowledge and ability to assist mine-action centers outside the region of Southeast Europe. Still, demining is a continuous effort requiring constant development and improvement.

To improve demining methods, specifically the use of mine-detection dogs, the members of the South-Eastern Europe Mine Action Coordination Council agreed that, due to the extensive and pioneering use of mine–detection dogs in Bosnia since early 1996, it would be appropriate for Bosnia to host a mine–detection dog center for the Balkans region.[1,2] SEEMACC is a technical body established as an integral facilitator of regional cooperation and interregional projects through its expertise and knowledge of mine action within the region. The group promotes an integrated regional approach to planning demining activities, fundraising and establishing demining standards, as well as the installation of a forum in which to exchange ideas on the training of personnel. Besides being an important facilitator of regional cooperation, the MDDC also initiated the creation of the region's Humanitarian Demining Standard chapter covering the use of mine-detection dogs.[3]

Regional Training Projects

The Global Training Academy, located in San Antonio, Texas, United States, provided initial training to MDDC with the sponsorship of a grant by the Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs in the U.S. Department of State (now the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement) in 2003. The U.S. State Department also funded the operational costs of the MDDC and facilities construction/improvements through the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance in Slovenia until the MDDC became financially self-supporting in 2006. Cooperation with the ITF and the Marshall Legacy Institute in the United States has resulted in many successful projects. It is worth mentioning a few of the most important regional training projects, including those at the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action and the Lebanon Mine Action Center. The MDDC has trained a total of 16 mine-detection dogs and teams from March 2006–June 2009 for ANAMA, along with 10 mine-detection-dog teams for the LMAC; the Marshall Legacy Institute provided the majority of the funds for purchasing and training the dogs.

ANAMA training. MDDC trainers faced certain challenges in training and integrating mine-detection dog teams for Azerbaijan. In the first "six-pack" (a set of six mine-detection-dog teams, where a team is comprised of one dog and its handler), an MDDC trainer encountered differences in applicable standards and climate conditions between the training grounds in Bosnia and the on-site location in Azerbaijan. However, the training projects were evaluated as highly successful, and MDDC received positive feedback from ANAMA officials.



Iraqi handler Nedžad Skenderović and MDD Allen take a break.
PHOTO COURTESY OF ELISE BECKER, MARSHALL LEGACY INSTITUTE

As emphasized by an MDDC trainer, accommodation and care of the mine-detection dogs in Azerbaijan was excellent and similar to that of the proven system in Bosnia. However, the adjustment period and integration into teams proved more challenging. Even after undergoing intense training at MDDC, the dogs needed some time to acclimate to Azerbaijan's climate and soil conditions. While it was not a considerable amount of time, trainers should remember that MDDs are not machines, but animals that need to adapt to new surroundings. To ensure proper integration and long-term results, MDDC trainers suggested a longer period of supervision from the ANAMA trainers and handlers during their integration period, as both dogs and trainers needed to become acclimated to Azeri conditions.

Soil and vegetation in Bosnia and Azerbaijan differ in composition, which affects the explosive evaporation intensity, making it more difficult for dogs to sniff out landmines. Furthermore, while Bosnian standards for use of MDDs assume dogs detect explosives buried at 10 centimeters (3.9 inches) deep, Azeri standards assume 20 centimeters (7.9 inches) deep, therefore requiring additional training.

From the MDDC experience, language barriers were not an issue, as training was conducted in Russian and English. In terms of logistics, however, there was some concern, as transportation issues often arise. Sometimes transporting dogs safely to their destinations is challenging, considering the numerous requirements and limitations imposed by airline companies. MDDs are often treated as "special luggage" and require a human escort. Despite such transportation obstacles, the team training and integration projects were successful, especially considering the excellent reviews of the demining tasks upon completion, which is ultimately the most important factor.

Lebanon training. Another MDDC success is its training projects for the Lebanon Mine Action Center, funded by MLI. So far, MDDC has trained a total of 10 MDD teams from 2008 to 2009. Besides the background knowledge and experience of the Global Training Academy, another advantage of this training project was that standards applied in Lebanon were the same as those in Bosnia, making it easier to integrate the dogs and handlers into teams.

Regional Projects

One of the first regional demining projects in which MDDC participated provided support to DanChurchAid's demining teams in northern Albania, from April to November 2005. MDDC conducted a similar project in Southeast Albania in July 2005, and another to support demining of the border area between the Republic of Croatia and Serbia in November 2005. Since Bosnia, Albania and Croatia are countries within the same region, the affected areas have very similar climates, soil and vegetation, and the same accreditation[4] procedures and applicable standards for humanitarian demining.

Cooperation with DCA continued into 2006 in several regions of Albania, and was followed by support for demining teams of the Explosive Ordnance Demining Management Section Kosovo from 2007 until the present. MDDC transport them to the work sites and required translators with operational language abilities in English, Arabic and Sorani Kurdish. Logistical support to accommodate handlers and dogs in Iraq was also more demanding than in Southeast Europe.



A MDDC team working in Albania.
PHOTO COURTESY OF DANCHURCHAID

teams are currently being deployed in Kosovo.

Besides the interregional exchange and cooperation with DCA, MDDC also participated in demining tasks in Iraq from July 2008 to May 2009, and their contract was extended to December 2009. Accommodated in a self-contained Mines Advisory Group base of operations at Bani Maqam, Chamchamal, MDDC handlers received more extensive logistical support than is usually provided for regional tasks. Among many other requirements, handlers underwent physical check-ups, including tests for HIV and hepatitis, and attended security interviews with the relevant security services. Handlers also required armed escort teams to

Demining tasks have been performed in adherence to the local mine-action standards of Northern Iraq (i.e., Kurdish), and the success of the MDD teams led to a contract extension in June 2009. Considering the numerous cultural, political and climate differences found in the various regions, the joint cooperation of the demining task, which involved the Marshall Legacy Institute, MAG, MDDC and the Global Training Academy, and with funding from the U.S. Department of State, has proven to be highly efficient.

Conclusion

From MDDC's point of view, it must be emphasized that the challenges of regional and interregional cooperation are more manageable if addressed in the initial planning phase. During this phase, it is essential to estimate timelines accurately and adjust performance and logistics to be in line with local standards and conditions. Each project MDDC has taken on provides a foundation of experience that can be applied to future projects. Cooperation between mine-action centers and MDDC continues to be a successful enterprise as mine-action experts strive to reduce the mine threat in the most efficient and cost-effective manner. Despite cultural differences and conditions, all mine-action organizations share the same desire to free countries from mines and unexploded ordnance, and MDDC strives to build on this common ground.

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