

Sri Lanka: Mine Action in a Deteriorating Environment

A major mine-action program has been underway in Sri Lanka since 2002, when a cease-fire agreement between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was signed. However, after a seemingly inexorable escalation in violent guerrilla tactics used by the LTTE, open warfare resumed, and in May 2009, the government announced that it had achieved military victory over the LTTE. This article traces the various ways that the increase in conflict affected mine-action activities in Sri Lanka.

by Chris Rush [Geneva Call]

The cease-fire agreement and peace talks between the government of Sri Lanka and LTTE seemed to offer the possibility of an end to a decades-long, catastrophic conflict. Some 683,000 persons were internally displaced, of whom more than 174,000 lived in welfare centers and resettlement villages when the cease-fire was signed. The agreement recognized “the importance of improving living conditions for all inhabitants affected by the conflict,”¹ and in this respect, the return of IDPs and rehabilitation of war-affected areas were clear and immediate priorities. International organizations and donors agreed, believing that such rehabilitation offered opportunities for the displaced and allowed the potential to build confidence between the national government and LTTE.²

The presence of anti-personnel landmines in areas where the displaced would resettle was a major hindrance to rehabilitation efforts,³ as these devices were utilized extensively by both sides in previous phases of the conflict. The exact number of landmines that had been laid was unknown, but it was estimated to be between 1.5 and 2 million.⁴ The issue grew increasingly urgent as people began spontaneously returning to their homes.³ While neither the government of Sri Lanka nor the LTTE had renounced the use of anti-personnel mines³—allowing the possibility of the future use of these weapons in the event of renewed hostilities—donor governments and institutions felt that this stance should not be an impediment to supporting mine action and provided a significant level of funding for mine-action activities.⁵



A marked minefield in northern Sri Lanka.
PHOTO COURTESY OF LANDMINE BAN ADVOCACY FORUM

A variety of agencies, both national and international, began work on mine-action projects under the coordination of Sri Lanka’s National Steering Committee for Mine Action. Clearance of mine-affected areas was one of the main priorities, and a number of international agencies began clearing areas jointly held by the government and LTTE.

There was optimism about the possibility of swift mine-clearance progress. Indeed, in the first few

years after the cease-fire was signed, the optimism seemed well-placed; for instance, it was noted that clearly defined mined areas—mostly fenced and marked—led to a Level Two Survey⁶ being conducted in just six months, a task described as “impossible in any other country.”⁵ In 2004, the Sri Lankan government set a target of achieving a mine-free country by the end of 2006.⁴ However, after the LTTE pulled out of peace talks in 2003, there was a gradual worsening of relations between the parties to the conflict. Initially, this animosity resulted in isolated and sporadic outbreaks of violence, but there was a more rapid escalation in conflict beginning in 2006, with more or less open warfare ensuing the following year. This fighting culminated in the abrogation of the cease-fire by the government of Sri Lanka in January 2008.

The use of AP mines is illustrative of the changing tactics of the LTTE. While the early years of the

cease-fire were characterized by a general absence of credible allegations of the use of AP mines, the reality changed as the situation deteriorated. In a meeting with Geneva Call in 2005, the LTTE stated that it fully recognized the importance of removing mines, and promised that new mines would not be emplaced.⁷ However, allegations of mine use were levelled against the LTTE in 2006,⁸ and such claims were more numerous and specific the following

Lanka consistently asserted that it did not resume mine use.¹² While the use of AP mines is always a cause for concern, it would be particularly disturbing if mines were laid in areas that had previously been cleared and deemed mine-safe. It is not apparent whether any of the alleged mine use was in areas that had already been cleared of mines, although at least one of the apparently credible allegations of AP mine use made

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year.⁹ The LTTE denied all charges,⁹ and the organization asserted that if mines were still being laid, it was, in fact, government forces that were laying them.¹⁰

From the information available, it was difficult to truly evaluate mine use in the country, so in 2006, Geneva Call wrote to both the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to request approval of a mission to investigate and verify the allegations. It should be emphasized that because neither party had banned the use of landmines, they had no obligation to approve such a course of action. Still, it was disappointing when neither party agreed to the proposed verification mission.⁹ Although the allegations of the post-cessate-fire agreement mine use were mainly against the LTTE, the *Landmine Monitor* asserted in 2008 that “knowledgeable sources ... have alleged that Sri Lankan security forces used AP mines in 2007 and 2008.”¹¹ Nevertheless, the government of Sri

against the LTTE was in the center of a village that had been resettled after a previous round of fighting, and it was subsequently evacuated again.¹³ Because the LTTE still had not renounced AP mine use, Geneva Call urged the LTTE, at the very least, to refrain from laying mines in areas that had already been cleared of AP mines.¹¹

Reduced Operational Effectiveness

Mine action became increasingly hampered by the escalation of conflict, and the deterioration of the situation affected ongoing mine-action activities in a variety of interconnected ways. By 2006, those agencies that were working in LTTE-controlled areas were citing the security situation as a reason for slower-than-expected implementation of mine-clearance activities.¹⁴ In these areas, the work of mine-action agencies was reportedly disrupted by the recruitment, both voluntary and forced, of staff by “local security forces.”¹¹



Demining in Sri Lanka.
PHOTO COURTESY OF TAMIL REHABILITATION ORGANISATION

In government-controlled areas, the volatile security situation also affected mine-clearance activities, with operations reportedly being affected by the surge in violence.¹¹ The *Landmine Monitor* noted that the operating environment was becoming increasingly ineffective because of tighter controls on the movement of people, equipment and supplies.¹¹ The imposition of work permits for expatriate workers reportedly affected the operations of humanitarian agencies.¹⁵ The movement of mine-clearance equipment into LTTE-controlled areas was reportedly problematic even before the escalation in conflict.¹⁶ However, it became even more difficult as the situation deteriorated, and beginning in August 2006, restrictions on the movement of various items, such as fuel, affected the effectiveness of mine-clearance agencies operating in these areas. Of particular concern was the prohibition of the movement of the personal protective equipment utilized by deminers.¹⁷

While a number of agencies, including Norwegian People's Aid, Swiss Foundation for Mine Action, Danish Demining Group and Mines Advisory Group, were initially operating in LTTE-controlled areas in the north, by 2007 only NPA still had the necessary permission from the government to work there. However, in January 2008, NPA suspended operations, asserting that it had no choice in the matter because its Technical Advisors were not granted permission to re-enter the LTTE-controlled areas after a routine stand-down in their operations.¹⁷ By the end of 2008, NPA ceased its operations in Sri Lanka altogether.¹⁸

Loss of Mine-action Workers

Perhaps the starkest and most unwelcome illustration of how the deteriorating security environment

affected mine action is the violent disappearance and death of mine-action staff. By any standards, Sri Lanka has been a dangerous place for humanitarian actors. Forty-three humanitarian workers have reportedly been murdered in Sri Lanka since the beginning of 2006, while 20 more individuals were reported missing.¹⁹ Five of those murdered, and nine of those that have disappeared, reportedly worked for international mine-action agencies. Most of the incidents occurred when the staff members were off duty or on the way to or from work. These incidents, besides being abhorrent, served to undermine the operational effectiveness of the agencies in question. For instance, after the murder of a DDG staff member in Jaffna in August 2007, the organization suspended its operations for nearly two weeks.¹¹

With only a few exceptions,²⁰ affected agencies did not make public comments about the deaths or disappearances of their staff. This reticence has been in stark contrast to incidents that involved the killing or abduction of other humanitarian staff; these humanitarian agencies issued statements condemning attacks, and where relevant, called for the release of staff.

There may be a number of factors behind this different approach. The author was told by a mine-action program manager that an incident involving the abduction of a staff member of his agency did not necessitate a response, as it was considered unlikely that the staff member had been targeted because of his work for the agency, but for other reasons unrelated to his professional life.²¹ In other instances, mine-action agencies may have viewed that issuing public state-

ments was not worthwhile, because such measures had proved ineffective in either stopping the killings or leading to the release of those abducted. Furthermore, agencies may have also been concerned that in an increasingly polarized situation, any comment might be construed as critical of one party or another, and would compromise their neutrality.

Shifting Priorities

The increase in conflict led to the emergence of new needs for mine-clearance expertise, particularly in respect to battle-area clearance. In 2008, the *Landmine Monitor* noted that mine action in Sri Lanka had shifted from being a development- and reconstruction-related activity to being focused largely on responding to immediate unexploded-ordnance and mine-contamination threats.¹¹

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Some agencies expressed concerns about the prioritization of tasks in this new environment. It was felt that the National Steering Committee for Mine Action had been sidelined, and that decisions about priorities were primarily made by the military. It was reported that there was pressure put on agencies to concentrate their efforts on supporting the clearance of areas to allow for the return of the recently displaced. While positive in itself, one agency felt that the prioritization was driven by political—rather than human-

itarian—concerns, as the numbers of displaced people received increased international attention. Furthermore, some expressed skepticism about the quality of clearance that could be carried out within the newly imposed time frame.²²

Withdrawal of Donor Support

Increasing concern about a drift toward renewed conflict led to a review of funding priorities by a number of donors. Some governments decided that it was not appropriate to fund mine clearance at a time when there was a real risk of a resumption of mine use by either, or both, of the involved parties. Geneva Call was informed that the Netherlands had withdrawn funding for this reason,²³ and later, Switzerland followed suit.²⁴ In a speech made to commemorate the International Day for Mine Awareness 2006, the U.K.

Ambassador to Sri Lanka announced that because Sri Lanka was still not a signatory to the AP Mine Ban Convention, no more funds for mine clearance would be made available that year. Furthermore, he stated that unless there was progress toward a ban, funding in the following year would go toward survey activities only. He stated, "This may appear a tough line, but what is the point of financing the lifting of landmines only to see them being put back into the ground when conflict recurs or security demands [use of mines]?"²⁵

The approach of linking funding to progress toward an AP mine ban was not unanimously accepted. The Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation, which operated humanitarian-demining teams in LTTE-controlled areas, expressed that the pressure placed on parties involved in the conflict to make mine-ban commitments amounted to “politicization” of mine-action funding, and that it led to very short-term funding and was problematic for agencies carrying out the work.²⁶

During the early years of the cease-fire, there were a number of national and international actors involved in attempts to convince the parties to move toward a ban on the use of AP mines. However, progress was limited; the government linked accession to the AP Mine Ban Convention to reaching an agreement with the LTTE over the “non-use” of landmines, while the LTTE made it clear that they would only consider banning the weapon if significant progress toward peace was made.⁵

As the conflict escalated, the opportunities and prospects for advocacy were reduced. There was increasing hostility to any initiative that seemingly limited the means and methods of warfare. Geneva Call, which had been engaging the LTTE in a ban on landmines with the endorsement of the Sri Lankan government,²⁷ was soon no longer granted permission by the government to visit LTTE-controlled areas to proceed with this engagement.²⁸ Later, the organization was informed by the government that it would not even be granted the necessary permission to enter the country. The Sri Lanka Campaign to Ban Landmines was basically inactive by 2006. Similarly, the Landmine Ban Advocacy Forum

ceased to function toward the end of 2007. It is noteworthy that advocacy seems to have diminished at the same time that allegations of renewed mine use were surfacing.

A general increase in hostility toward NGOs also affected agencies involved in mine action. In 2006, mine-clearance agencies operating in LTTE-controlled areas were criticized for cooperating with the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation at a time when the LTTE was carrying out attacks with command-detonated “claymore” devices.²⁹ It is notable that despite the presence of mine-action agencies in LTTE-controlled areas—including at that time the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation, which was working under the coordination of the National Steering Committee for Mine Action—there was no public clarification by government officials of the important humanitarian role played by the mine-clearance agencies.

Conclusion

The escalation of conflict in Sri Lanka profoundly affected mine action. Some of the challenges were predictable, though others could not have been foreseen. To ensure that they remain effective, mine-action agencies and donors working in the context of ongoing conflict must be able to carefully monitor and assess developments, and respond quickly and appropriately to new challenges as, and when, they emerge. Similarly, affected states must ensure that, even in the midst of conflict, they strive to cultivate an environment conducive to mine action. However, since the collapse of the LTTE in May 2009, recent efforts have been made to improve mine action. Organizations including UNICEF, U.N.

Development Programme, Mines Advisory Group and Handicap International are conducting mine action in Sri Lanka, with numerous other projects taking place.³⁰ ♦

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Chris Rush is a Programme Officer for Geneva Call, focusing on its work in Asia. He holds a degree in sociology with an African and Asian studies emphasis from the University of Sussex, East Sussex, U.K., and a Masters of Arts in refugee studies from the University of East London, London, U.K. He worked for a refugee organization in the U.K. before working for a humanitarian organization in Thailand. More recently, he worked for three years in Northern Sri Lanka for another humanitarian organization immediately prior to joining Geneva Call in January 2007.

Chris Rush
Programme Director
Geneva Call
PO Box 334
CH 1211
Geneva / Switzerland
Tel: +41 22 879 1050
Fax: +41 22 879 1051
E-mail: crush@genevacall.org
Web site: <http://www.genevacall.org>