# The Rapid Response to *Operation Cast Lead*

When the United Nations Mine Action Service was asked to assess the need for a mine-action presence in the Gaza Strip following *Operation Cast Lead*, a 23-day conflict involving the Israeli Defence Forces and Palestinian militias in 2008, it was thrust into one of the world's most complicated humanitarian operating environments. This article provides a background for the mine-action program in Gaza, summarizing the key challenges and lessons learned during the first four months of operations in this complex environment.

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Between 27 December 2008, and 18 January 2009, the Israel Defence Forces conducted *Operation Cast Lead*, a military campaign with the objective of preventing Palestinian militants from firing homemade rockets into Israeli territory. The campaign caused severe damage to infrastructure, including roads, government offices, nongovernmental organizations, U.N. facilities, schools, hospitals and agricultural land. Following the Israeli withdrawal, the United Nations Mine Action Service—at the request of the U.N. Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and in coordination with the U.N. Mine Action Team—agreed to initiate a Technical Assessment Mission under the *United Nations Framework for Mine Action Planning and Rapid Response*. This team arrived in Gaza on 23 January 2009, with these objectives:

- Establish the level of unexploded-ordnance contamination
- Determine what assistance UNMAT and the international mine-action community could provide to the affected civilian population, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, the U.N. Country Team and other humanitarian actors



Damage to a classroom in a Balgis al Yemen school, one of the many buildings investigated by the Technical Assessment team.

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- Facilitate the opening of humanitarian corridors and the delivery of humanitarian aid in line with *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1860*[1]

It became clear to the Technical Assessment Mission team that in the days immedi-

ately following the conflict, Palestinian forces in Gaza had conducted surface clearance of unexploded ordnance, moving items to central storage locations where they could be kept prior to their destruction. They concluded, however, that a number of international explosive-ordnance-disposal teams would be required to support the safe return of the humanitarian community to Gaza. These teams would be needed to dispose of the remaining UXO that still littered schools, U.N. and NGO offices, hospitals and homes, as well as UXO that was expected to be found buried among the rubble of destroyed buildings. Under the coordination of UNMAS, the UNMAT–Gaza Office was established to initiate a rapid response to neutralize the UXO threat.



A woman walks past ruins of a building UNMAT–GO will investigate for evidence of UXO.

### The Threat

While anti-tank mines were used as a source of explosives to support the mechanical razing of homes, UNMAT found little evidence to suggest that landmines were used otherwise. The key threat was from UXO, with urban centers being the most heavily affected. As of early June 2009, 28 percent of items discovered contained white phosphorus and 72 percent contained high explosives. As of 30 June 2009, unconfirmed reports indicated there had been nine post-war accidents resulting in eight fatalities and 27 injuries.

### Operations

In the 10 days immediately following the cessation of hostilities, UNMAT and implementing partners conducted UXO-investigation tasks that facilitated the opening of 37 schools, Gaza's six main arterial routes, and key U.N. offices and warehouses. Within six weeks, all U.N. facilities, contaminated schools and hospitals in Gaza—and a majority of clinics—had been surveyed and the UXO was removed. The core remaining UXO threat now lies within the ruins of collapsed and damaged buildings. There is a high probability that UXO remains in the rubble of the 15,550 housing units that were destroyed or damaged in the conflict.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the United Nations Development Programme, as well as several nongovernmental organizations, have initiated projects to remove more than 150,000 tonnes (165,000 U.S. tons) of rubble from these buildings, a necessary precursor to reconstruction of homes and other structures. UNMAT advised UNRWA and UNDP that if current trends continue, there is a medium to high risk of UXO contamination in 49 percent of collapsed/damaged buildings. All organizations involved with rubble removal have therefore placed a strong emphasis on explosive-ordnance disposal in their operational planning, the result of a major information push on the part of mine-action staff and the insistence of several of the donors supporting the rubble removal that mine action be written into project documents.

The key focus of mine-action operations will be supporting the process of rubble removal and reconstruction by ensuring that the estimated 9,000 Palestinians involved in this complicated task are able to carry it out with the minimum possible threat of injury or death from UXO. This task will be achieved through UNMAT input into the assessment and planning for such projects, extensive UXO identification and awareness training for those involved, UXO-specific task planning and site-management training for site supervisors, and the provision of an "on call" EOD service when items of UXO are located among the ruins of buildings.

### The Challenges

A wide array of political-, security-, access- and information-related challenges combine to make Gaza a highly complex operating environment.

**Politics.** Gaza is, *de facto*, controlled by Hamas, with other clan, paramilitary and private-sector actors enjoying significant influence. Still, a majority of the international community views the Palestinian Authority (predominantly Fatah) as the legitimate governing body for all of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including Gaza. Power struggles between Hamas and Fatah have led to violent clashes in both Gaza and the West Bank. Ambiguity surrounding the question of who runs Gaza has caused complications for UNMAT and implementing partners, in particular when trying to distinguish with which local-authority actors to coordinate. Getting the job done in accordance with ethical considerations, mindful of the humanitarian principle of "do no harm," and without aggravating any of the actors whose support is necessary for sustained operations, has involved a delicate balancing act.

**Access.** While the intra-Palestinian power struggles create a challenging environment in which to operate, the Gaza context is further affected by the influence of Israel, which controls access for the vast majority of people and goods into and out of Gaza. Representatives of international aid organizations and the foreign media can enter subject to coordination with and security clearance from the Israeli authorities; however, entry and exit must be coordinated in advance, and passage through the high-security Erez terminal between Israel and Gaza is often a lengthy process. In the initial weeks of the mine-action program, the process of gaining permission for individual NGO staff to enter Gaza often took several weeks—a long period of time in the context of a rapid-response scenario.

Robert Serry, the U.N. Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, has identified access as the key challenge to humanitarian work in Gaza. Given the obvious Israeli security concerns associated with permitting mine-action equipment and explosives to be brought into Gaza, gaining approval to import this



UXO will likely be found in these Gazan buildings.

equipment in time to be effective has been one of the biggest challenges. All equipment brought into Gaza must be approved in advance by the Coordinator of Government Affairs in the Territories. Access for specialist EOD and protective equipment has now been approved (three months after the first request was made), and approval for importation of explosives and other associated equipment needed for UXO destruction was granted in principle in late May 2009.

**Security.** The Israel Defense Forces continue to operate in and around Gaza, often in response to militant groups directing homemade rockets toward Israel. Movement of U.N. staff is severely restricted under U.N. security regulations, and while some parameters may be warranted, the risk-averse nature of these decisions can severely impact operational-planning implementation and quality assurance. Ongoing Israeli military operations in the buffer zone inside Gaza adjoining Israel mean that mine-action work in these areas must be coordinated with the IDF, often implying delays. The Gaza Strip is a small area, increasing the possibility that teams will find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time; thus, ground incursions, targeted airstrikes and ongoing militant operations constitute the key threats to staff safety.

**Information and coordination.** Gathering information on the extent and nature of the UXO threat has not been a straightforward task. On occasion, local authorities have denied access to sensitive areas for teams conducting risk assessments. Initial post-conflict assessments by the United Nations and other international bodies did not look at the possible impact of UXO. An international mine-action sector has not played a role in Gazan humanitarian and recovery efforts previously; thus, those responsible for planning did not factor in the potential that UXO contamination would impact the people or humanitarian operations. Furthermore, as a majority of mine-action work will be conducted in support of the work of other agencies, coordination of mine-action activities is strongly linked to other agencies' funding and planning. As most UXO remains within the rubble of damaged buildings, UNMAT is now affected operationally by other agencies' planning—or lack thereof—as well as their ability to implement projects in a timely manner.



A 2,000-pound bomb discovered in the second story of a damaged building demonstrates the challenge EOD teams face.

Other challenges have included:

- Establishing relationships as a new actor on the humanitarian scene and gaining an understanding of who does what, where, and why in a highly politically-charged and sensitive operating environment (although building relationships with longer-established U.N. and NGO entities that could provide advice has proven valuable).
- Suitable mapping of Gaza's general area has not been available, with implications for coordination with IDF, accurate record-keeping and operational tasking.
- The media has not always been a positive force, as information relevant to or concerning the mine-action program has, on occasion, been used out of context or twisted to negative effect.

Overall, UNMAT has learned to work around, or despite, these challenges, and to develop solutions or alternatives.

### Lessons Learned

A key lesson—reinforced at many junctures—has been the necessity of keeping staff and equipment to the minimum quantities necessary. The UNMAT consists of a Programme Manager, Security Officer, Support Services Officer and Programme Officer, with four national staff. The NGO implementing partners have operated with between five and seven one-man EOD teams, a Community-liaison Manager, and a small international and national support component. During the first months, prior to the approval and importation of EOD equipment, teams had no option but to work with rudimentary non-specialist tools, and to carefully prioritize only the items truly essential for operations. Planning of program requirements was based on the realization that a light footprint was most likely to be successful in an environment in which access is not straightforward.

The Coordinator of Government Affairs in the Territories stated in January that only mine-action organizations falling under the coordination of the U.N. Mine Action Team would be permitted to operate in Gaza. UNMAT has subsequently limited the number of implementers to one (with the exception of a three-month period between March and May 2009 when two organizations were working). In the context of Gaza, where movement, information and operations must be tightly controlled for security and political reasons, the advantages of operating with only a few organizations are numerous.

The Israeli insistence on a close relationship between the U.N. and implementing partners meant that a relatively unconventional structure was established. Instead of a traditional mine-action coordination center in which the United Nations oversees the work of implementing actors, a "Mine Action Team" structure was employed: A U.N. Programme Manager runs the overall project, while utilizing the senior technical member of staff from the implementing NGO as Operations Manager. Both components share offices in Gaza and Jerusalem, and this integrated structure has so far led to streamlined operations and minimized information gaps, with the added advantage of reducing overall staffing requirements.

In two related examples of good practice, the program's structure, *modus operandi* and, to an extent, its existence, have been continually evaluated during its first four months. The huge logistical, political and security constraints to operations have meant that several "crunch dates" were set, on which the management in Gaza and UNMAS New York have discussed whether the program should be closed, downsized or expanded to align with the reality on the ground. Similarly, the UXO problem in Gaza has (very deliberately) not been over-sold to donors, the media or the aid community. From the beginning, the United Nations and donors were assured that this situation was "not another Kosovo 1999 or Lebanon 2006," with no evidence of cluster munitions, no conventional use of landmines and UXO contamination not as extensive as initially expected. With a distinct mission statement, the project could realistically be predicted to have a finite scope, with a maximum duration of two years from beginning to end. While perhaps somewhat counterintuitive, these factors have been beneficial for maintaining donor confidence; in particular, the willingness to take a step back and honestly examine what the U.N. Mine Action Team and its partners can achieve (and whether it is useful) has been well-received by those funding the program.

### Conclusion

Establishing a mine-action program in the context of one of the world's longest running conflicts—where suspicion runs deep in the psyches of all actors—has been a highly complicated task, even demoralizing on occasions when it appeared the political impediments were too great to overcome. Yet patience and persistence, as well as the occasional "outside the box" solution, have contributed to UNMAT's success during its first four months in Gaza. Mine action is one of the very few humanitarian sectors with the ability to operate in Gaza and to produce success stories in this highly restrictive environment. The U.N. Mine Action Team and partners will continue their work in the Gaza Strip until January 2011, by which time it is hoped that the area's deadly legacy of conflict will have been eliminated, facilitating a return to a safer and more stable life for the people who live and work in the Gaza strip.

*See Endnotes, Page 78*

*The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.*



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