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Unsung Hero: Akech Athieu

By Amy Crockett [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

Dedication to his job, competence, diligence and strength of character are just a few admirable qualities of Akech Athieu. His outstanding dedication to mine action in South Sudan has played a vital role in eliminating the region's mines following decades of civil war.

Akech Athieu was born in 1967 near the end of the First Sudanese Civil War between North and South Sudan (1955–1972) during a time when clearance of unexploded ordnance in the country was just beginning. “As a child, I never came across these dangerous items, but I did frequently hear of mine/UXO-related accidents that happened in, and close to, my community,” says Athieu. When fighting broke out again, Athieu temporarily relocated to Uganda to finish his post-secondary education.



Rising Through the Ranks

At the age of 26, Athieu became involved with the field of mine action when he joined the Sudan People's Liberation Army. He selected combat-engineering as his area of military interest. “I've always had a natural strength for technical jobs,” he explains. In 1997, the SPLA took control of key towns in South Sudan. The SPLA's political counterpart, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, authorized and established a mine-action organization, Operation Save Innocent Lives, to remediate the threat of landmines and perform humanitarian mine action in regions under SPLA command.¹ Because of Athieu's combat-engineering knowledge, the SPLA selected him to assist with road clearance to facilitate humanitarian aid. “The Managing Director of Operation Save Innocent Lives, Aleu Ayeiny Aleu, really encouraged me when I started my demining career, noting that it would be my role in Southern Sudan's future,” says Athieu. Today, OSIL is South Sudan's national mine-action organization.

Following his military and combat-engineering training, Athieu received additional explosive-ordnance-disposal education from Mines Advisory Group when it signed a Memorandum of Understanding with OSIL in 1998. After completing his EOD Level 2 course in Yei, South Sudan, in 2001,² MAG encouraged him to complete his Level 3 training, conducted by the International Mine Action Training Center (now the Humanitarian Peace Support School—profile on page 60). “I've also completed a supervisor's course using funding from MAG and conducted by Mine Awareness Trust,” says Athieu.

Gradually, Athieu rose through the ranks, becoming the most technically qualified OSIL member.² As a result, he progressed to leader of an OSIL demining group and manager of other OSIL demining teams. “All of my promotions within OSIL were based on merit, skill and experience,” he says. Between 2002 and 2003,² however, OSIL's funding was discontinued. Athieu and his colleagues found themselves without income. The loss of funding forced Athieu and the majority of his coworkers to live off subsistence farming. To this day, Athieu remains unsure of the factors contributing to the salary terminations, but he was told they were related to the resurgence of the North-South conflict.

Despite the lack of an income, Athieu decided to continue demining. "The work isn't about receiving a salary. I joined the SPLA because I was committed to [helping] my people. ... I want to ensure that the future of South Sudan [is] a safe one," he says. When OSIL was unable to secure funding to continue its operations, MAG and OSIL signed a second MOU in 2004. Consequently, MAG conducted a mine/UXO risk-evaluation survey in the contaminated town of Kapoeta, in which Athieu served as liaison between MAG staff and the locals.² MAG established its operations a year later. The transfer of existing OSIL technical teams to MAG helped jumpstart Athieu's mine-action career with MAG; he became the first National Technical Field Manager for MAG/OSIL in South Sudan. "I am very proud of this recognition and achievement. I hope this encourages other Sudanese to work hard to achieve their ambitions," he says.

Hannah Bryce, Athieu's MAG colleague, has known him since July 2007. She believes he is a perfect example for others in the mine-action field. To return to a country after years of internal conflict, "work for OSIL to contribute the skills you have, even at times without pay, and then to pursue a career within MAG shows strength of character and a true commitment to humanitarian mine action," she says. Bryce met Athieu after he had just finished his EOD Level 3 training in Nairobi.² She said MAG steadily gave him more responsibility, and he proved himself more than competent at meeting the challenge of the Technical Field Manager position. The promotion meant Athieu could now manage demining teams without supervision and could also perform controlled demolitions up to 240 kilograms (529.11 lbs).² "It has been a pleasure to see his career progress, and I know everyone within MAG South Sudan is really proud of this achievement also," Bryce says.

In May 2009, Athieu received formal U.N. Mine Action Office accreditation. "The UNMAO quality-assurance inspector checked my command and control of my demining team, and a site inspection was conducted to ensure that I properly laid out the site," he explains. The inspection officer also verified that he implemented safety precautions and correct marking systems. Athieu is now internationally qualified to train and manage EOD and demining teams without supervision.

Hard Work Pays Off

Although he is aware of his success against difficult odds, Athieu's proudest accomplishment is witnessing the progress made in the communities where he assisted with mine clearance. The heavily contaminated town of Kapoeta in the eastern part of South Sudan especially stands out in his mind. When he first joined MAG, he began work in the town, a community with frequent mine accidents and restricted mobility for its residents. The contamination offered little opportunity for expansion. "With clearance activities beginning in Kapoeta over the last four years, I have been able to see the town grow from a small, tightly restricted community to a large town with schools, clinics and small businesses," says Athieu.

Despite the determination and assistance of Athieu and other dedicated deminers, contamination in South Sudan remains an extensive problem, with mines affecting a large area. Rather than using strictly manual clearance, Athieu believes clearance in South Sudan could be improved with more mechanical assets to speed up the process by discrediting suspected hazardous areas.

The dangers involved in landmine/UXO removal and destruction are always in the back of Athieu's mind, but because he carries out his work with great care and strictly follows safety procedures, he has no fear. His family does not worry either. "They know that I am a very cautious person, and they are confident in my abilities," he says. Athieu offers advice to those considering mine-action involvement: "Remember that the objective of clearance is safety,



Athieu, hard at work, investigates hazards.

both your own and others', so it is critical that you implement your work with high standards."

South Sudan is still recovering from decades of civil conflict, but thanks to Athieu's hard work and dedication, it is a safer region today. He has become a role model in the world of mine action, demonstrating through his career achievements the ability to advance within the field and establish and maintain an effective national humanitarian

mine-action capacity in South Sudan. ↗

Biography



Amy Crockett is a senior studying media arts and design at James Madison University. She is also an anthropology minor and Copy Editor at *The Breeze*, JMU's student newspaper.

Endnotes

1. Operation Save Innocent Lives. "OSIL's History." <http://www.cameo.org/osil/history.html>. Accessed 23 October 2009.
2. Mines Advisory Group. "Sudan: Partnership and Dedication." 27 April 2009. <http://www.maginternational.org/news/sudan-partnership-and-dedication>. Accessed 23 October 2009.

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