Reflections from the Field: Lao PDR, Surveys and Land Release

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The Case of BiH

According to the Landmine Monitor Report 2008, 170 square kilometers (42,000 acres) of land were released to public use through area reduction in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2007, using 21 accredited demining machines. The estimated area that still needs to be cleared consists of 1,738 square kilometers (430,000 acres). If we look at the number of agricultural tractors in the country, approximately 30,000, and we imagine temporarily equipping 300 of them, i.e., 1 percent of all units available, with low-cost ground-processing tools and light armoring for assessing the presence of landmines, assuming that each one could have the same productivity of one of the 21 machines used for area reduction in 2007 (around eight square kilometers [three square miles] per year), the problem of landmines in BiH could be potentially solved or drastically reduced to small, confined, highly contaminated areas in less than one year.

Conclusion

As under-developed countries continue to be affected by the world food crisis, the need for arable land is increasing. Research into more responsible agricultural practices is also becoming an imperative to fight the dramatic consequences of climate change. Investing in the redesign of local agricultural technologies can both speed up mine clearance and improve the future productivity of one of the 21 machines used for area reduction in 2007 (around eight square kilometers [three square miles] per year), the problem of landmines in BiH could be potentially solved or drastically reduced to small, confined, highly contaminated areas in less than one year.

Reflections from the Field: Lao PDR, Surveys and Land Release

by Stephen Pritchard [NPA–Laos and UXO Lao]

With an example and a discussion of Norwegian People's Aid's work with UXO Lao in Lao PDR, the author explains how choosing the right tasks and performing the tasks correctly can allow land to be released safely and confidently.

An Unusual Discovery

Looking at a map, one would assume that the farmer's land would also be free from another common risk, UXO. The nearest bombing was over five kilometers (three miles) away and, although the available data is incomplete and inaccurate, it generally gives a positive correlation among accidents, contamination and poverty. UXO Lao's management team at Tha Khao, the provincial capital of Khammouan, thought this land would have a negligible threat of UXO and suspected that the farmer's fear was based on vague "rumors" that circulated among the locals.

On meeting with the survey team, the farmer pointed out the boundaries of the land and explained why
In the past year, I have joined several such surveys with UXO Lao. In most cases, the need for full clearance is beyond question. There are, however, occasional requests for the threat level requires clarification by Technical Survey or which no further action is required. This depends on the land user’s willingness to accept the decision, as the goal of land release is to instill confidence that land is safe for use based on a thorough assessment. Technical Survey and clearance are more productively directed toward situations in which UXO contamination is highly suspected.

Major international nongovernmental organizations, such as The HALO Trust, have made significant inroads into reducing “exaggerated” contamination records using sensible field survey and database review. Across the humanitarian sector in general, such credible efforts have tended to be in isolation; most surveys have focused on capturing all Suspected Hazardous Areas. Lao PDR is different—there is no comprehensive database of polygons. 2 The raw contamination data is based on 40-year-old U.S. Air Force bombing records, the accuracy of which is mediocre at best, given the technological limits at the time of the fighting. The original Landmine Impact Survey conducted by Handicap International in 1997 has never been followed by a comprehensive attempt to measure or record UXO contamination. Despite the stipulations in Article IV of the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which Lao PDR has signed and ratified, no such effort is planned. Perhaps the condition of the databases in other mine-affected countries serves to dissuade rather than encourage “baseline survey.” The sheer quantity and impact of bombing and ground fighting in Lao PDR far exceeds that of most other countries.

Land Release

Land release is the process of changing the status of known or Suspected Hazardous Areas to released land using Non-technical Survey, Technical Survey and/or clearance in the most relevant, effective and efficient manner. Land can be released within a former SHA by gathering sufficient information to confirm the absence of mines or UXO in the area with a high degree of certainty and, therefore, recommending that suspicion of mines/UXO should no longer prevent the local population from using the land. The concept of land release re-distributes limited clearance capacity: It’s not just about reducing polygons using a checklist. A “bombie” lies near a fruit plantation. Five years ago, many clearance tasks were yielding no UXO. The thought it should be cleared. He had found a large piece of sharp metal and assumed it was fragmentation from a piece of UXO. When questioned by the survey team, however, the farmer admitted that the land around his was in use; he did not know of any ground fighting that took place in the area; and he had used this plot of land for 10 years without finding UXO.

There were no credible indicators of ground battles or bombing besides the single fragment of metal. We all agreed that full clearance would be wasteful and believed the farmer simply needed a team to ‘check his land’ as a confidence-building measure. The visit of the survey team in itself increased his confidence in using the land, and a follow-up Technical Survey was scheduled for the 2009 work plan.

Surveys

Considering the requirement by most donors for using funds effectively, the solution should have been land release by Non-technical Survey, which is different from the solution chosen above. The planned Technical Survey visit by a team wielding detectors would not affect the farmer’s use of the land because he was already using the land. At the time, UXO Lao had yet to adopt land release by Non-technical Survey (adopted in 2009).

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release emerged because many clearance operators constitute a relatively expensive and time-consuming clearance activity for land with limited or no mines or UXO. In many cases, the original data reflected the best information and tools available at the time. Subsequent projects after years from the initial clearance and shifting inherent attitudes regarding risk and mine-action changed the perception of these recorded areas. In other cases, an inaccurate original survey is blamed for over-stating the contamination; land release has generally resulted in the reduction of land requiring expensive area clearance. If someone suspects land is contaminated, we have to do something but not a clearance. Non-primary clearance tools such as machines and canines are also used as land-release methods.

While land release in itself is not a new concept, incorporating it as a national policy including survey is new. Land release by clearance has been the only available response option in many countries, including Laos until 2007. Though commercial organizations have applied land-release methodology for decades in their own operations, only recently has it been recognized by some host governments. The notions of a consistent methodology and thresholds of risk certainly aren’t new. But the notion that some of these requested areas have had no contaminants, and considering that one piece of metal on his land, records have shown As shown in the above example of the farmer with clearance. However, this will not capture contaminants on the operational level, task perimeters are defined by consistent land-release decisions by clearance operators—UXO Lao is the largest recipient of bilateral donor funding in the area. UXO Lao conducted a study called “Enhancing the Technical Survey.” This led to the Enhanced Technical Survey project, aimed at supporting UXO Lao as it embraced effective land release. The first step was to introduce a Technical Survey that would discourage full clearance if no UXO was found. Securing non-technical survey was devised to enable land release in the rare cases in which there were no indicators and also to provide baseline data for post-clearance assessment. Both were absent before UXO Lao embraced a clearing agency. At the national level, GICHD developed a risk model to support consistent land-release decisions by clearance operators. Both projects, although technical rather than operational, have played a significant role in enabling both the GICHD and UXO Lao team to consider how to best ensure that they usually make the right decision. However, these decisions have to be reviewed consistently and sensibly. Realistically, its success depends on many factors, some of which seem unlikely to be fulfilled in the immediate future. NPA has determined that one of its key strengths is its land-release support project with UXO Lao. In some measures, the project has already achieved its goals in and ended any UXO clearing as a fundraising mechanism, and most work for key decisions. I can see why it has taken some time to implement this, but in the long run, it will be worth it. GICHD, UNDP and NPA have invested time, effort and generous donor resources into encouraging land-release policy. Different methods have been employed and the end result has been a sustained focus on sound risk management and effectiveness of clearance work. UXO Lao now has a policy of land release consisting of not only clearance but Technical and Non-technical Survey. The methodology incorporates the GICHD risk model as well as elements of NPA’s project formerly known as Enhanced Technical Survey. Ideally, it will be used consistently in the long term but not here to substitute for national reviews. UXO Lao is a mine-action organization with long-established mine-action programs. The challenge facing the sector is to make sure it does the right job, without adding extra layers of confusion.

Government and Clearance in Laos

Broadly speaking, clearance in Laos is reactive rather than proactive. Some international NGOs and companies operate clearance efforts with relatively fixed resources, few clients or development partners who are risk-averse and restrictive in the services they will pay for. At the operational level, task perimeters are defined by consistent land-release decisions by clearance operators—UXO Lao will take on the job, without adding extra layers of confusion.

Tolerance

The periodic review of risk-tolerance thresholds is important. “Targets” must be avoided. Land-release performance is not measured in square meters but in the quality of the decisions. Right now, the tolerance-to-action correlation is imperfect. If there is reliable, first-hand evidence of UXO in or immediately around land use, the area is subject to clearance. If there are rumors of UXO, accidents, battles, military positions or bombings in or around the land, Technical Survey is applied. If there are no indicators, the land is released following a Non-technical Survey. However, the effectiveness of the work is at the mercy of the requests.

The biggest threats to effective land release, as with clearance, are maintaining consistent management focus and resources. Without adequate resourcing, there will not be sufficient monitoring of field activity to ensure effective land release. The “great idea” purposed by land release is relegated to a well-meaning paper exercise. Without good activity and policy, release is at the mercy of the requests. There is no substitute for a well-supported, sensibly-recruited and sustained management with good “field” time, as well as administrative competence. A well-trained staff is needed to visit the field, review decisions and ask, “Are we doing the right job, the right way?” The good news is that the cost of maintaining such capacities is, in the long run, dwarfed by the cost of ineffective solutions to seemingly endless polygons or “dodgy requests.” The need for consistent oversight of field operations increases with organization size. In UXO Lao’s case, with 960 staff, a strong central “ownership” of operational policies is important.

Recognizing the need to encourage reform, the United Nations Development Programme, NPA and UXO Lao approached a donor-funded enhancement of land-release methodology. NPA Demining began to collaborate on two main projects. In 2005, NPA and UXO Lao conducted a study called “Enhancing the Technical Survey.” This led to the Enhanced Technical Survey project, aimed at supporting UXO Lao as it embraced effective land release. The first step was to introduce a Technical Survey that would discourage full clearance if no UXO was found. Securing non-technical survey was devised to enable land release in the rare cases in which there were no indicators and also to provide baseline data for post-clearance assessment. Both were absent before UXO Lao embraced a clearing agency. At the national level, GICHD developed a risk model to support consistent land-release decisions by clearance operators. Both projects, although technical rather than operational, have played a significant role in enabling both the GICHD and UXO Lao team to consider how to best ensure that they usually make the right decision. However, these decisions have to be reviewed consistently and sensibly. Realistically, its success depends on many factors, some of which seem unlikely to be fulfilled in the immediate future. NPA has determined that one of its key strengths is its land-release support project with UXO Lao. In some measures, the project has already achieved its goals in and ended any UXO clearing as a fundraising mechanism, and most work for key decisions. I can see why it has taken some time to implement this, but in the long run, it will be worth it. GICHD, UNDP and NPA have invested time, effort and generous donor resources into encouraging land-release policy. Different methods have been employed and the end result has been a sustained focus on sound risk management and effectiveness of clearance work. UXO Lao now has a policy of land release consisting of not only clearance but Technical and Non-technical Survey. The methodology incorporates the GICHD risk model as well as elements of NPA’s project formerly known as Enhanced Technical Survey. Ideally, it will be used consistently in the long term but not here to substitute for national reviews. UXO Lao is a mine-action organization with long-established mine-action programs. The challenge facing the sector is to make sure it does the right job, without adding extra layers of confusion.