

The Challenges of IED Awareness and MRE in Afghanistan

Improvised explosive devices have become a significant threat to the people of Afghanistan and have surpassed the threat posed by other types of explosive remnants of war. In order to combat these dangers, the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan has worked closely with other groups to develop an IED-awareness booklet that supports current mine-risk education efforts.

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The people of Afghanistan have seen more than their share of war and conflict. Explosive remnants of war and their consequences have been a part of Afghans' lives since the 1980s. Mine-risk education has therefore been important in communicating the dangers of ERW. Children have always been among the most vulnerable to these dangers, and MRE campaigns are therefore usually aimed at them.¹

In the current conflict between the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and insurgents, civilians are again living with the consequences of war. With the rise of insurgent activity, IEDs have become increasingly common. IED casualties have risen tremendously and now surpass the ERW casualties. This development fostered discussions about whether the mine-action community should create risk-education materials about IEDs, culminating in the development of an IED-awareness booklet in 2008.

Mine-risk Education in Afghanistan

MRE has gone through tremendous changes since its humble beginnings in the late 1980s. The first mine-awareness programs were developed by Operation *Salam*, the United Nations' emergency relief operation set up in Pakistan in 1988.² At the time, the Soviet war in Afghanistan was at its peak, lasting until 1989, when the last Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan and the country became the scene of a vicious civil war.^{3,4}

During the first years of Operation *Salam*, it provided MRE mainly in refugee camps along the Afghan border with the specific intention of preparing returnees for the dangers of ERW. At the end of the war, mine-awareness operations began to move into Afghanistan itself.⁵

The fundamental methodology established under Operation *Salam* still provides the basic framework for MRE. MRE is commonly taught by mobile teams, with two teachers and a driver. The teacher team normally consists of a man and a woman, giving them the ability to conduct gender-segregated classes.^{6,7,8}

In general, MRE programs consist of lectures with the use of posters, silk screens, activity cards, brochures, booklets and pamphlets as education materials commonly termed "training aids." The teacher introduces the students to ERW using posters.^{9,10} The IED-awareness booklet is intended to supplement existing program materials.

To ensure that the guidelines and teaching systems set by the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan are followed, UNMACA's quality-assurance teams perform routine checks of the MRE sessions. This system is established to provide feedback to the MRE teachers and nongovernmental organizations running MRE programs in particular regions.⁷

The basic structure of MRE has changed very little over the years. The teaching system developed around regular MRE constitutes a teaching ideology that transcends Afghan MRE as a



Children leaving a mine-risk education class held in the village mosque of Qal'eh-ye Sefid in the southwestern part of the Kabul province.
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whole and reaches community-based training, as well as mine-risk education using mass media. The overall MRE messages UNMACA developed provide the basis for all MRE within the civilian sector of Afghanistan. The NGOs providing the teaching in the field also follow the UNMACA guidelines.

From the 1980s until the mid-1990s, materials were very technical, with detailed descriptions of types and models of ordnance and mines, and their individual effects. As time went on, it became clear that participants were receiving more information than they could absorb during the relatively short sessions.¹⁰ Since then, a series of messages was developed to simplify the MRE training.

Today there are 10 messages that constitute the core of Afghan MRE. The last major revision of the messages was made in the winter of 2008, when UNMACA developed materials that introduced several victim-assistance issues. The 2005 National Disability Survey Handicap International developed has been the foundation for understanding the importance of developing victim-assistance awareness within MRE.^{10, 11, 12}

The new materials have been shaped so that the messages fit the Ministry of Education's MRE plans and national curricula.^{14, 15, 16} When the International Security Assistance Forces approached UNMACA in 2007 about cooperating on the IED-awareness booklet, the framework for cooperation between UNMACA and the Ministry of Education was being prepared for the transition. This meant that ISAF, UNMACA and the Ministry of Education worked as semi-autonomous teams while developing the content and design of the IED booklet.^{17, 18}

Insurgency Activity in Afghanistan 2008

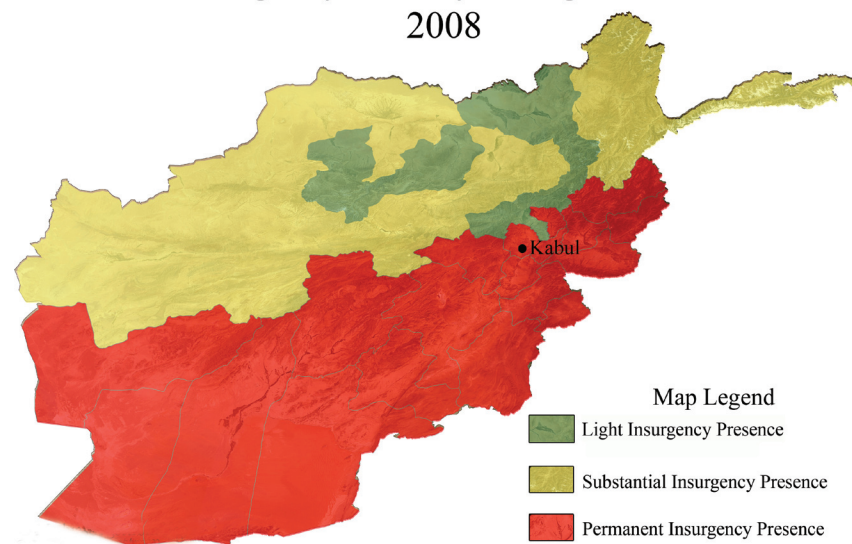


Figure 2: This map shows the activity of insurgents in Afghanistan as of August 2008.

Skepticism between the civilian and the military sectors was evident from the start. Within UNMACA, as well as the Ministry of Education, there was concern that a civilian-military cooperation could blur the line between military and humanitarian operations.^{13, 18}

IED Awareness in MRE

ISAF began developing the booklet in the fall of 2007. Both the military and civilian sectors saw IED-awareness training among the population as an important area that was underscored by the increasing number of IED incidents and a growing number of casualties in each incident.

In August 2008, the International Council for Security and Development estimated there was permanent insurgent

activity in half of the Afghan provinces, and only six provinces were characterized by low insurgent activity (see map above). The strong insurgent presence has made it difficult for the mine-action community to work in many

areas of the country. Field staff have raised concerns about using MRE materials that can be interpreted as having links with Afghanistan's government by displaying such items as logos and pictures of officials (e.g., military or police personnel). The field staff of the Afghan NGO Organization of Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation are worried that they risk being killed if such materials are found on them by insurgents. This concern is also one of the main objections expressed by field staff about teaching IED awareness, and it has emphasized the need for caution in sensitive areas.⁵

In large parts of Afghanistan, where the insurgency has a permanent presence, the number of IED incidents is at its highest, which means that the areas where IED awareness is most needed are also the most inaccessible. The number of IED casualties has greatly surpassed those of ERW since 2006. This development emphasizes the need for teaching IED awareness in the area. The IED-awareness booklet represents the first step in countering this

development and gives the population some tools to deal with the IED threat in their everyday lives.

IED-awareness Booklet

Prior to creating the IED-awareness booklet, ISAF was engaged in MRE and IED-awareness independently in the field when the military provided training on an *ad hoc* basis. The United Nations and NGOs have criticized some of these MRE and IED-awareness initiatives for disrupting the civilian MRE system already in place by not following the guidelines UNMACA developed.^{18, 19}

For the development of the IED-awareness booklet, an organizational framework for cooperation was established. UNMACA was the primary agent in the practical development and design of the booklet, working specifically with ISAF to develop a set of IED-awareness messages that were compatible and complementary to the current MRE system of messages. The Ministry of Education set up a review board that addressed problems in the design and implementation of the material regarding Afghan cultural sensibilities and political issues that could become problematic in the everyday use of such a booklet.^{20, 21}

It soon became clear that a new framework was needed to sufficiently address problems concerning IEDs. Consequently, the Ministry of Education, UNMACA and ISAF developed a three-pronged IED-awareness message that included the recognition of IEDs and dangerous areas, the detection of IEDs, and safe behavior. One of the most important tasks was to help children recognize IEDs, so the booklet constructed a separate message specifically for children.²² The booklet also warns of odd and out-of-place objects. Out-of-place objects were often used as booby traps during the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the civil war, and are often used by insurgents today.^{22, 23}

In the safe behavior section of the booklet, the last two messages are fundamentally different and break with the post-conflict scenario through which MRE messages are commonly developed. The messages reflect

the dangers of reporting an IED and emphasize that Afghanistan is a conflict zone. The need to inform more than one adult reflects the fact that there may be local support for the insurgency. "Don't be afraid to mention something that seems odd" is an attempt to ensure that countermeasures against the IED are taken.



Figure 4: IED Awareness Booklet. The use of illustrations of military and police was heatedly discussed during the development process in relation to the security of MRE personnel and locals.

Implementation in a Conflict Environment

It is impossible to measure how much danger a child puts himself and other family members in by reporting an IED, but it constitutes a serious dilemma that the reporting of an IED might trigger a military response. This reality makes it difficult for the mine-action organization to be a purely neutral humanitarian agent. The direct cooperation between ISAF, UNMACA and the Ministry of Education, along with the transfer of jurisdiction over the MRE field to the Ministry of Education, underlines that MRE in Afghanistan has indeed become a part of the ongoing state-building project (i.e., construction of a functioning state).

The state-building project that began at the Bonn conference in 2001²⁴ and the following support of the sitting government has been a process of strong U.N. engagement, but semi-autonomous agents such as UNMACA have been able to function relatively unaffected by focusing on the demining and MRE tasks at hand. With the transfer of authority over the MRE field, UNMACA risks being politicized by different actors in the Afghan conflict. UNMACA and the affiliated NGOs are caught between an institutional post-conflict view of the field of mine action and the conflict situation they are faced with on the ground.

The map shown on the previous page emphasizes just how widespread insurgent activity is. The Afghan state is weakened furthermore by a lack of control over its own territory. Then-U.S. Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell addressed these issues in his speech to the U.S. Congress

on 27 February 2008, when he said, "The Taliban was able to control, with the population in the area, about 10–11 percent of the country. The federal government, on the other hand, had about 30–31 percent, and the rest was local control."²⁵

As mine action has come under the jurisdiction of the Afghan state through the Ministry of Education, the problems of the government's regional control have also impacted UNMACA. It challenges the mine-action community's ability to work both in and outside of state-controlled territory. The development of sustainable MRE that can succeed in all areas of Afghanistan is therefore seriously challenged by the current institutional framework of MRE.

The Challenge Continues

Afghanistan today is at the forefront of MRE development, dealing with tremendous challenges relating to

the security of the Afghan people, as well as the mine-awareness community itself. There are tremendous problems surrounding the introduction of IED awareness in MRE. These are challenges that cannot solely be solved in the planning stage but need to be addressed when performing IED awareness in the field. Thus, there is a need for feedback organs that go beyond regular quality assurance, ones that are able to evaluate not only the immediate effect of IED-awareness training but also its wider impact on the mine-action community and its ability to work effectively.

The statistics clearly show a humanitarian need for addressing the IED issue. How to deal with the IED problem raises many of the core issues humanitarian agents find themselves facing when working in conflict zones. The mine-action community's neutrality is challenged when it develops MRE materials in cooperation with the state and government. The community also needs to negotiate with other non-state actors to gain access to areas outside state control to protect the citizens there.²⁶

Including IED awareness in the national MRE program in Afghanistan is in many ways the responsible choice by the Ministry of Education, UNMACA and ISAF to deal with the actual problems facing human security in Afghanistan; however, it does open a Pandora's box of new challenges that need to be addressed. The consequences of the choices made during the development of the IED-awareness booklet have yet to be seen and examined. The choice of including police and military personnel in the illustrations could conceivably pose a security risk to the field staff and the people

they are trying to reach, as there is a danger of blurring the line between the military and humanitarian sector. This challenge, combined with the transfer of jurisdiction of MRE to the Afghan state, could pose a significant obstacle to the ability of MRE campaigns to reach their audience, especially outside state-controlled territory. A well-functioning institutional framework that is able to work in Afghanistan as a whole is therefore vital to the success of the IED-awareness campaign.

The development of the IED-awareness booklet has meant a much-needed transfer of knowledge from the military to the civilian sector in dealing with IEDs. This cooperation and the commitment to IED awareness need to go beyond the initial work of the IED booklet. In order to properly address the IED threat, comprehensive research and field testing are needed so risk-education materials can address the new challenges that face human security in Afghanistan. ♦

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