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## Falkland/Malvinas Islands

by Simon Smith [ Center for International Stabilization and Recovery ]



In 1982, the Argentine *junta* government, faced with recession and declining public support, invaded the Falkland/Malvinas Islands, whose ownership had long been disputed with the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> To the surprise of the Argentine generals, the United Kingdom counter-invaded the territory it claimed as the Falkland Islands. By the end of the three-month conflict, the Falkland/Malvinas Islands were again under British control. Ownership of the islands has long been disputed, but since 1833, excluding a brief period during the Falklands War, Britain has been in control.<sup>1</sup> Despite numerous U.N. resolutions<sup>3</sup> directing the United Kingdom and Argentina to seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict, they have failed to resolve their territorial dispute over

this land.<sup>4</sup>

### Remnants of War

During the occupation, approximately 20,000 mines were emplaced in 117 different locations.<sup>5</sup> Eight different types of ordnance were used—four anti-vehicle and four anti-personnel. Demining efforts are complicated because the soil is soft and the mines shift.<sup>5</sup> Following the conflict, approximately 1,400 landmines were cleared before efforts were halted due to injuries. Subsequently, the focus of efforts on the islands shifted to mine-risk education, marking minefields and fencing.<sup>6</sup> The task of completely demining the affected areas has been considered unfeasible due to the soil that allows the mines to sink, potential impacts to wildlife, and deminer injuries and deaths.<sup>7</sup> The first demining attempt occurred in the 1980s; the main objective was to map existing mines while clearing any areas that posed an imminent threat to civilians. This attempt failed due to the difficult terrain. The lack of viable demining methods and resulting deminer casualties has shifted efforts toward surveying and fencing affected areas rather than clearance,<sup>8</sup> while new technologies attempt to address the complicated conditions.

### Increased Coordination

In 2001, the United Kingdom and Argentina agreed to share information with each other in order to conduct a feasibility study that would consider costs, risks and options.<sup>6</sup> Since then the United Kingdom and Argentina have submitted joint briefings and documents to the parties of the Ottawa Convention,<sup>9</sup> funded a feasibility study by Cranfield University and met regularly in both Buenos Aires, Argentina, and London, England. Cooperation between the

United Kingdom and Argentina has become increasingly common on the issue of landmine removal, despite continuing ownership disputes. Furthermore, work on establishing a Mine Action Co-ordinating Committee in the Falklands has also begun.<sup>10</sup>

### New Clearance Prospects

The feasibility survey recently conducted by Cranfield University concluded that demining is now “technically feasible.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, the clearance will still be “challenging” due to the wide range of isolated terrain—some of which is not even accessible to four-wheel-drive vehicles.<sup>11</sup> According to the feasibility study, new techniques and technologies now make landmine clearance a distinct possibility. Even so, clearance will be long and difficult; the feasibility study conducted by Cranfield University estimated that it will take 10 years to clear the landmines, subject to testing.<sup>11</sup>

### Impact on Civilians

Many argue that clearance should not be a priority, as there have been no civilian casualties since 1982. Even the residents of the islands themselves have been reluctant to back the efforts. Many see the £100 million (US\$140 million<sup>12</sup>) necessary to clear the landmines as an unnecessary expenditure.<sup>13</sup> Instead, residents backed a previous proposal to spend the potential allotment of funds in areas of the world requiring more immediate attention.<sup>13</sup> Demining could even have an adverse affect on the islands’ population. According to Ambassador John Duncan of the United Kingdom’s Foreign Office, “A large-scale demining program over an extended period of time will severely strain the infrastructure of their small community.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the feasibility study warns against the adverse affects demining could have on the environment, particularly as current reclamation methods are ill-suited to the soil types of some of the minefields.<sup>10</sup>

### Recent Developments

Despite the controversy, clearance is scheduled to begin soon.<sup>7</sup> The Ottawa Convention,<sup>9</sup> which the United Kingdom signed in 1997, requires the landmines be removed by 2009. The United Kingdom was granted a 10-year extension at the Ninth Meeting of States Parties to the Convention when it agreed to begin clearing the mines in the Falklands.<sup>7</sup> In December of 2008 the project was anticipated to begin sometime in the following few months. The United Kingdom will have 10 years to complete the project. Clearance will begin with the Fox Bay 8, Goose Green 11 and Stanley Area 3 minefields.<sup>10</sup> The dispute over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands is unlikely to end soon, yet the landmine-clearance coordination between Argentina and the United Kingdom is a hopeful sign, in that it demonstrates an example of cooperation to reclaim land damaged by war. 🚩

### Biography



**Simon Smith** worked at *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* from January to May 2009. He completed a Bachelor of Arts in global justice studies at James Madison University in May 2009.

### Endnotes

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