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Getting a Piece of the Pie: Lebanese Women Become Deminers

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that Jordan reaches the obligations under the Ottawa Convention by May 2009 so that landmines no longer impact communities nor are an impediment to further social and economic development. NPA also considers the environmental effect of its work.

NPA’s Operations

When NPA first arrived in Jordan, it was informed that approximately 12 million square metres (4.6 square miles) were presumed hazardous. As the first step toward releasing some of the land in this area, NPA is collecting all available information from the Jordanian Armed Forces, along with relevant minefield records and sketches from the Israeli Defence Forces. A detailed desk survey was conducted. NPA went through all the relevant information and confirmed that the records provided were accurate. NPA’s Operations Planning for the Region

Jordan has long suffered the negative impact of landmines. Rich agricultural land has remained uncultivated, irrigation and water projects delayed, housing construction postponed, and historical and cultural heritage sites unexplored. Based on the data collected from government sources and the Royal Engineers Corps, it is estimated that roughly 500,000 people (8 percent of the population) are affected by the presence of mines. National efforts to eradicate the landmine threat in Jordan have been ongoing since 1995 when His Majesty the late King Hussein instructed the REC to begin humanitarian mine clearance in the Jordan Valley.

The Wadi Araba region has gained in strategic importance over the last decade. The construction of a university campus is planned in the Aqaba area and there are plans for further development of hydro-electricity and tourism in the area, as well as the mega Red-Dead sea pipeline project, which will have major bearings on the future development and quality of life for Jordanians.

Conclusion

The National Committee for Demining and Rehabilitation and Norwegian People’s Aid are making strides toward reaching their goal of complying with the Ottawa Convention and establishing Jordan as a mine-action leader in the Middle East. The Jordanian government has taken the landmine problem very seriously since well before the Ottawa Convention came into being. Jordan continues to provide funds and expertise to create a country free of landmines. The removal of the humanitarian threat of landmines to local populations and the reutilisation of the agricultural land along the Syrian border will help alleviate poverty along the border, where agriculture is the primary source of income. It is also worth mentioning that Jordan hosted the Eighth Meeting of the States Parties to the Ottawa Convention in November 2007.

Getting a Piece of the Pie: Lebanese Women Become Deminers

By Marie Mills [Swedish Rescue Services Agency]

M in action aims to reduce the impact of mines and unexploded ordnance on affected populations in contaminated areas. This goes beyond saving lives and limbs and reducing the socioeconomic impact of mines and UXO. The effects of mines and UXO are closely linked to poverty; therefore, an holistic approach to mine action and development programs that support the reutilisation of the land is essential in order to achieve such integration, but when faced with an emergency, it is easy to revert to the west-trending path of conventional mine-action implementation.

SRSA Hires Women Deminers

Female Lebanese deminers were recruited and trained in January 2007 and have worked on-site since February. They originally constituted an all-female team, the first of its kind in the Middle East, but this team later became part of two mixed-gender teams of deminers. Female deminers are no longer unique in the Arab world or even in southern Lebanon because Don Orban Aid deployed female battle-area-clearance deminers shortly after SRSA did so.

Initially, the media attention around the female demining team in southern Lebanon was massive; one CNN headline was “Ground Breaking Women in Lebanon.” The women are indeed ground-breaking, but valid questions the mine-action community should ask itself are, “Why hasn’t this happened sooner and why are women still scarce on battle areas?”

Gender Roles in Mine Action

In 2003 the United Nations Mine Action Service published Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes. The book promotes a gender perspective in all aspects of mine action, as well as provides simple guidelines to consider gender and achieve gender balance in mine-action programmes. The objective is to create efficient, cost-effective and culturally-appropriate mine-action programmes.

The term gender perspective is often over-simplified, taken to mean simply the promotion of women’s rights. It is, in fact, the recognition of the diverse needs and roles of men, women, boys and girls, and how society views them. From an operational point of view, it seems the promotion of a gender-specific perspective when it comes to saving lives and limbs is pretty indisputable, while the promotion of women’s rights as part of mine action is no evidence to all mine-action operations managers. Mine action is no different from any other emergency or development field in adopting a gender view on gender-related issues, where saving lives is the primary goal and the issues of equal rights and opportunities are a heavy load to add when dealing with the emergencies that arise.

With donor money running dry, the aim for mine action is no longer a world free from landmines and UXO, but a world free from the impact of landmines and UXO. This means that mine action can no longer count cleared or destroyed square metres as a measure of success, but rather it needs to assess and address the far more complex concept of measuring the impact of mines and UXO on human lives. Applying a gender perspective to the planning, implementation and evaluation of mine action programmes provides a tool to accomplish this goal, but still leaves us with the dilemma of how to ask the right questions to be useful.

Besides promoting a gender perspective (sometimes referred to as gender mainstreaming), integration is another mine-action buzzword, meaning mine action should be an integral component in development efforts. This approach is applied in order to maximise the results of development and to find solutions to problems mine action alone cannot fix. If a mine-free world is no longer an attainable goal, mine
Female Deminers Face the Challenge

The recruitment, training and deployment of the SRSA female demining teams was liberating in that it was both a breakthrough and an absolutely non-negotiable factor. It was quickly that the organisation was looking for both male and female deminers, but the relatively large female turnout to a recruitment that had not even been advertised (i.e., that was word-of-mouth only) caught SRSA by surprise. Of 12 female candidates, all but one women were accepted and trained. Six women passed the training and were turned into one team, modelled after the female demining teams previously used in Kosovo.

Women are proud to be pioneers but stress the fact that the challenge faced by Lebanese women to become cluster-munition deminers was not as great as one would think. Southern Lebanese women are more inured to risk and traditions than other region of the Lebanon, and women are still alive and well, women with physically demanding work outside the home are not novel in Lebanon.

Female deminers are a step in the right direction, but the women are still in a traditional role. Their efforts reveal a need for further support and advancement.

The Aftermath of the Hezbollah/Israel Conflict

Lebanon became the focus of attention when the scale of the cluster munition contamination became clear at the end of the 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. The Swedish Rescue Services Agency was one of the first organisations to start clearance operations after the ceasefire. Operations quickly grew from the initial Explosive Ordnance Disposal Rapid Response Team into a full-fledged EOD and battle-area clearance operations. The Lebanon programme, being the largest SRSA mine-action programme to date, soon had to face decisions on how to move away from emergency priorities and become a sustainable programme, reflecting the needs of the community in its programme priorities. This approach incorporated incorporating the SRSA gender policy for national staff level in Lebanon.

Since the conflict ended in August 2006, it has returned to relative normality. However, in the context’s view that street is impossible to erase the devastating effects of the Lebanese for decades. According to the U.N. Mine Action Centre–South Lebanon, 30 to 0 percent of the cluster munitions dropped by the Israelis failed to detonate. The humanitarian impact on such a small area that depends largely on agriculture is devastating. With potentially one million cluster munitions on the ground and in the trees, farmers and farm workers put their lives at risk daily to earn their living.

From a national perspective, agriculture plays a relatively major role in the Lebanon economy—about 12 percent of the gross domestic product. However, from a regional perspective, southern Lebanon is almost entirely dependent on agriculture, with nearly 80 percent of its local GDP generated primarily from crops like citrus, olives and tobacco.

The conflict broke out in the middle of the summer, interrupting the summer harvest. People who had on a massive scale, and harvests and livestock were lost as a major result of the hostilities. After the ceasefire, farmers lost substantial harvests because the crops had been neglected or equipment such as irrigation systems had been destroyed. Many citrus trees were burnt and destroyed by rockets being launched from the orchards or by incoming (Israel arti- lery, causing widespread destruction to farmers’ current and future livelihoods. For example, a newly planted orange tree takes five years to bear fruit and approximately 10 years to produce a profitable harvest.

Many farmers, especially small landowners or tenant farmers dependent upon loans and facing financial ruin, chose the dangerous endeavour of clearing land from cluster munitions as the lesser of two evils when compared to taking out loans. As crops in the region were lost or wasted, the shortest straw was drawn by Palestinian refugees or Syrian migrant workers normally working as day labourers on the plantations. As an alternative to unemployment, the potentially lethal harvesting of cluster munitions offered a welcome salary to these workers. Three to seven dollars ($U.S.) per collected item of UXO is a frightening price tag to put on a human life, but immediately after the conflict, munitions were readily available—made even more appealing because harvesters could make the average regional monthly income in less than a day.

In spite of cluster munitions littering the ground and trees, most farmers in the south go about their business as usual. Farmers and farm workers welcome the clearance being conducted by the Lebanese Army and international mine-action organisations, but leaving the fields idle while waiting for clearance is a luxury few can afford. Farmers desperate for income conduct pruning, and harvesting in close proximity of clearance activities.

It has been said that Lebanon is both a lib- eral and secular country, making it an “easy country” to employ female clearance staff. This is true to some degree, but southern Lebanon is more traditional and conservative than the region north of the Litani River, and light years away from the ultra-modern and chic Beirut. Liberal or otherwise, it seems it took two Scandinavian organisations with a tradi- tionally higher-than-average level of gender consciousness in their own countries to event- ually breach this new frontier for Lebanon and Middle Eastern women.

Conclusion

As women are a new to the field in which professional skill is the difference between life and death. When advocating for the right to equal oppor- tunities for women in mine action, it is easy to fall into the trap of arguing that possible gender differences make women better deminers than men. It is not about the women, by nature, are more meticulous, have better stamina and are less prone to bravado. Regardless of whether this statement is true, it is not the reason for granting women access to some of the better-paid positions that do not require higher education available to national staff in mine-action programmes. Women should not have to overcome to equal access to employment but should be judged simply on their merits as skilled individuals.

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women clearing the minefield. photo courtesy of per bjerde / srsm.