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Humanitarian Mine Action in Afghanistan: A History

After a decade of Soviet occupation in Afghanistan and the resulting internal conflict, the removal of explosive remnants of war (ERW) became a complicated issue. Systematic clearance of ERW was difficult to establish due to the volatile security situation and an inability to regulate clearance work. However, due to collaboration between the United Nations and Afghan nongovernmental organizations, mine clearance operations were successfully established in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

by Ian Mansfield

The humanitarian mine action sector, as we understand it today, originated in Afghanistan in late 1988. Prior to that time, many assumed that the military would be responsible for clearing explosive remnants of war (ERW), as was necessary in Europe after World War II. However, when the Soviet army withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989 after a ten-year occupation, it was suspected that millions of anti-personnel landmines remained. The Soviet army was not going to clear them, and no recognized government or army existed in Afghanistan to deal with the problem. With over five million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and another three million in Iran, the U.N. saw that a humanitarian catastrophe would unfold if these refugees suddenly decided to return home to their mine-contaminated villages.

During combat operations, the military’s only aim was to clear lanes through a minefield and then continue with their mission. While similar equipment was used in Afghanistan, civilian or humanitarian demining focused on clearing all landmines and returning land to productive use.

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Role of the United Nations

In 1988, the U.N. launched a general humanitarian relief program, Operation Salam, to assist Afghanistan. The United Nations Office for the Coordination for Humanitarian Assistance in Afghanistan (UNOCHA) initiated an appeal in October 1988 for funds to help train Afghans to clear the landmines. A village demining concept was considered the best option. The U.N. would train Afghan refugees in basic mine clearance skills and when they returned home they would clear their village of landmines. The response to the appeal was poor, and only Japan and the United States made pledges of money. The vast majority of countries still regarded landmines as a military problem rather than a humanitarian one.

A plan was devised whereby a number of predominately Western countries would provide military experts to UNOCHA to train Afghan civilians. This group included Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. After a two-week training course was developed, thousands of Afghans from the refugee camps in Peshawar and Quetta were trained in basic mine clearance skills from 1989 to 1990.

However, the plan did not work for multiple reasons. The level of mine clearance training provided was very basic and equipment, such as sensitive, military-style mine detectors, were not generally available. Moreover, in an extremely difficult and volatile security situation, returning groups of Afghan ex-fighters or mujahedeen with metal detectors and bags of explosives could just as easily have destabilized Afghanistan further. Even if the civilian deminers went in, there was no method of enforcing safety standards or to properly record and regulate their work. Finally, had this scheme been successful, the ability to continually train such large numbers of civilians would have been curtailed anyway. In February 1991, all contributing nations, except Australia and New Zealand, withdrew their contingents from Operation Salam due to commitments in the first Gulf War.

Afghan Demining NGOs

Due to ongoing insecurity in Afghanistan, refugees did not return in large numbers. UNOCHA began liaising with potential partner organizations to have them undertake mine clearance work on a more organized and controlled basis. There were over 100 NGOs conducting relief activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan at that time. However, none of these nongovernmental organizations worked in mine clearance, so UNOCHA decided to create specialized organizations to fill this void.

The training camp near Peshawar now trained fewer people but to a higher standard, and the graduates were employed by one of the new Afghan mine clearance NGOs according to predetermined needs. Although the U.N. had decided to establish Afghan organizations that would undertake mine clearance work, two other international mine clearance organizations also had their beginnings around this time. The first was the British charity The HALO Trust, standing for Hazardous Areas Life-support Organisation. HALO was first registered as a charity in the United Kingdom in 1988 by Colin Mitchell and began small-scale clearance operations in and around Kabul in 1989. With its roots in Afghanistan, the second international organization was MAG (Mines Advisory Group), another British NGO. Rae McGrath, founder of MAG, conducted the first survey of mined areas in some of the eastern provinces of Afghanistan and published a report under the name of MAG.

Organizational Changes

Before 1991, the mine clearance effort consisted of a series of separate U.N. funded projects, where each of the newly formed Afghan demining NGOs...
Some were organized to do mine clearance work, which was gradually referred to as humanitarian de-mining to differentiate it from the military combat term of minefield breaching. One such Afghan NGO, the Organisation for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR) undertook mine awareness or safety education campaigns in the refugee camps, while the Mine Clearance Planning Agency (MCPA) was set up to conduct minefield surveys, produce minefield maps and coordinate the work of the other NGOs. This latter task was doomed to fail, as traditionally NGOs dislike being coordinated by anyone, let alone another NGO. The funding for all projects was provided through UNOCHA.

Due to public criticism of slow progress and the way the landmine problem was being dealt with in Afghanistan, UNOCHA commissioned an independent evaluation to review the situation. The independent review was quite critical of the whole mine clearance set-up and identified over 40 areas where improvements could be made. It recommended that in the absence of a recognized government in Afghanistan, there should be more central oversight and coordination exerted by the U.N., along with other technical and operational changes. In December 1991, I assumed the position of mine clearance program manager, and together with the head of UNOCHA, Martin Barber, studied the evaluation report in detail, and devised a plan to introduce a more coordinated and centralized response to the problem.

We moved MCPA from Peshawar to our headquarters in Islamabad in early 1992. MCPA brought their minefield database and operations staff to Islamabad, and the combined offices were responsible for coordination, tasking, training, accident investigation, quality control, etc. The first National Mine Clearance Plan was issued in 1992, which set the priorities for awareness, survey and clearance work, and also outlined targets and funding requirements.

Survey

Due to security issues, it was not possible to conduct a national survey at the outset of the program. However, an excellent system of technical survey was established. Highly trained surveyors from MCPA would go to areas in Afghanistan where refugees were returning and conduct what were then known as Level 2 Surveys, now called technical surveys. The surveyors would collect information from locals and determine the minefield boundaries (along the lines of today’s land release concepts) using their detectors, marking the perimeter with red-painted rocks (as other marking material such as wooden stakes would be stolen). Surveyors would also make test lanes through the mined area to determine the types and number of mines that were present. Once a detailed, hand-drawn map was produced, the surveyors were required to predict how long it would take to clear the minefield. These forecasts became surprisingly accurate as time passed. The completed survey maps were put into the
priority system, and the tasks subsequently allocated to one of the demining NGOs to clear.

It was not until 1993 that increased funding and an improved security situation allowed MCPA to undertake a national-level non-technical survey. The aim of the survey was to better quantify the landmine problem, to help establish priority areas for clearance and to assist with effective, long-term planning of clearance operations. Trained interviewers, both men and women, conducted surveys with civilians in most provinces and districts of the country. The results were staggering; throughout Afghanistan as many as 20 civilians were killed or injured by landmines every day. Over 900 villages in 162 districts reported mine problems, and 2,300 minefields were identified covering an area of 380 sq km.

Together with refugee tracking figures provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this survey was the basis of our planning for many years to come. Because the total area affected by landmines was so large, each minefield was classified as high or low priority before it was scheduled for clearance. The determining criteria were as follows:

- All local groups must be united in requesting assistance
- Area must be secure and free from fighting
- Area is free from opium poppy cultivation
- Population must be able to draw immediate socioeconomic benefit
- Refugees must already be returning to the area
- Some support is to be provided by the local population
- Proof that funded rehabilitation or development projects are delayed due to mines

Manual Mine Clearance

Although slow, manual demining was the main method of clearance and was the most reliable way for achieving complete clearance. An advantage of manual demining was that it brought employment to war-torn Afghanistan. By 1992, over 2,000 Afghans became deminers with training, good salaries and insurance.

Originally, foreign military contingents trained Afghan deminers by adapting military mine clearance skills. The deminers were grouped into teams of 30 men (the same as a military platoon), with each breaching party consisting of three people. The first member of the breaching party operated with a long stick or a thin metal rod, gently feeling for trip wires, the second operated the metal detector and the third was the prodder man. In the military setting, the first person also acted as a lookout and would be armed with a rifle to provide protection.

It quickly became apparent that this process could be done more efficiently. The three-man breaching parties were immediately reduced to two men, while a section leader usually oversaw four or five breaching parties at any one time. After a series of trials in 1993, the program instituted a one-man drill where the detector operator laid down his detector after a reading and prodded his own signal. This, along with other changes such as reduced travel times and shorter breaks, helped improve clearance rates and efficiency.

Mechanical. The program also had a mechanical component. UNOCHA purchased two Aardvark flail machines in 1990, but while it was thought that they had great potential to speed up the clearance rate, the practical difficulties of security, logistics, maintenance and fuel consumption created excessive down time for the machines. Moreover, identifying suitable minefield sites for the machine to work was similarly difficult, and the machine did not guarantee full clearance.

Vegetation clearance was not normally problematic, except around irrigation canals. The program
later used a number of armored back hoes to prepare canals for clearance, and HALO experienced some success with armored bucket loaders when removing rubble from damaged houses in Kabul.

**Dogs.** RONCO ran a mule program during the Soviet-Afghan war, providing mules to the mujahedeen to ferry supplies through the mountains into Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal this was converted to a mine detecting dog program. RONCO established kennels, veterinarian services and training facilities in Pabbi on the outskirts of Peshawar. The training regime for the dogs appeared sound, but their employment and tasking in Afghanistan was haphazard. The United States wanted to move forward from this commitment, so the project was reorganized in 1992 under the Afghan NGO known as the Mine Dog Centre.

Up until 1992, the method of employing dogs was to assign a few dogs and their handlers to a manual demining team. However the majority of manual demining team leaders did not trust the dogs. They would often run the dogs over an area, and even if the dogs found nothing, would go over the same area with manual deminers. This was because the team leader had to sign a paper at the end of a job stating that the area was clear of landmines. The result was that it actually took more time, not less, to clear an area.

A decision was made in certain cases to make the dog team leader the person who signed the certificate declaring the area was clear. Trials were set up and the new groups had four dogs and handlers, along with a section of manual deminers. This proved to be more efficient and the speed at which these groups worked was amazing. To mitigate the risk of a missed mine, two or three dogs went over the same area to make sure nothing was overlooked. By using the dogs to their full capacity, they were very quickly able to eliminate areas that were not mined.

**Resource Management**

Evaluators and journalists visiting the program often asked questions such as “What is the rate of mine clearance” and “How much does it cost to clear landmines?” The daily rate of clearance by a manual deminer varied greatly, depending on the conditions. A manual deminer could clear, on average, between 10 and 100 square meters per day. The clearance rate for dog teams was much higher and while the advertised clearance rate for the flail machines was also much higher, it was rarely achieved.

The cost of mine clearance was difficult to determine. While donor contributions were simple to quantify, other support such as seconded technical advisers and grants of equipment were more difficult to monetize. As a rough measure, we totaled up our different types of income for the year and divided it by the total number of square meters of land the NGOs had cleared. This consistently worked out
to about US$1 per square meter; this was a figure that was often published.

The cost of clearing an individual landmine was even more problematic. Based on the annual income of the program divided by the number of mines found, each mine cost approximately US$300 to clear. This figure was widely used in the international press, particularly to highlight the fact that a weapon that cost only a few dollars to buy and place in the ground, was now costing hundreds of dollars to clear. However, this figure needed to be clarified. If teams were working in large, defensive minefield belts, they would find many mines quite easily and the cost per mine would go down. Alternatively, a road or an agricultural field only needed a couple of mines to prevent people from using the area completely. Despite attempts to reduce the area that needed to be cleared down to the minimum using the survey teams, large areas often yielded only a few mines. In these cases, the cost could rise as high as $1,000 per mine.

Post-1995

In 1995, the program continued despite immense difficulties during the Taliban period; subsequent U.N. program managers were Bill van Ree and Ian Bullpitt. Dan Kelly ran the program during the period of the U.S. invasion in 2002 and after that the new Afghan government asked the U.N. to continue running the program, thus Alan Mac Donald and Abigail Hartley from UNMAS continued the work. In 2012, Mohammad Sediq Rashid took over as the first Afghan Director of the United Nations Mine Action Center for Afghanistan (UNMACA), and in recent years, efforts have been made to have the Afghan government and their Department of Mine Clearance take over full management of the program. After 26 years of operations the program has grown to involve 52 NGO or commercial organizations employing over 8,000 Afghans. Over 80 percent of minefields have been cleared and Afghanistan has set itself the target to be mine free by 2023.1

See endnotes page 67

Ian Mansfield has worked in mine action for the past 25 years. Between 1991 and 1998 he was the United Nations Program Manager in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Laos. He then worked as the UNDP Mine Action Team Leader in New York for four years, followed by nine years as the Deputy Director of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD). Mansfield now works as a consultant based from his home in Australia. His book, Stepping Into a Minefield, about his experience in the early days of mine action, was published in October 2015.

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