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The Mine Action Express … or the Wreck of the ‘09

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The Mine Action Express… or the Wreck of the ’09

The author discusses current challenges relating to an effective global mine-action strategy; he considers approaches and policies that could enhance or impede demining efforts worldwide. There are many emerging concepts to consider in order to improve mine action, such as mainstreaming, risk management and national ownership. The author discusses potential future plans of action the community must undertake regarding these issues in order to deal effectively with landmines and explosive remnants of war.

by Dennis Barlow [ Mine Action Information Center ]

I. The Mine Action Express… or the Wreck of the ’09

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I n the 20th century, railroad lines became famous for highly efficient, progressive and dependable travel—or for dramatic accidents, which captivated the height of negligence and bad planning. Whether these railroad events are agonizing or amazing, the images and emotions they evoke—similar to mine-action accidents and accomplishments—are vividly etched into our minds.

At the Mine Action Information Center, it seems to us that the rapidly developing state of mine action has reached the point where we can, like great and majestic train lines, combine the best of many technologies and innovations to provide effective and secure service—or it can force together conflicting strategies and mechanisms to cause its own “great train wreck.”

Over the past year, some of the best practitioners, policymakers and pundits involved in mine action have developed some thought-provoking and timely concepts that should be considered for integration into mine-action campaigns. I will discuss a few of these ideas here, not only with a view to their validity for specific ideas, but also with an eye to integrating them into a total system that will yield the greatest overall efficiencies.

National Ownership

While multinationality on owned mine-action programs seems to be a universal goal, it is becoming evident that it is an elusive condition. Studies by Monis Kjellman and Haaparinta of International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) and others argue that it is not just the non-functioning state that finds national ownership difficult to achieve. In spite of the positive connotations of the term, many are marked by even conflicting implications just below the surface.

Effective national ownership implies a string of interrelated conditions. It suggests a strong national will; an integrated set of government agencies; the ability to recognize, build and maintain capacities; and a skill and willingness to engage the populace. These characteristics have proven difficult for countries emerging from crisis situations. Therefore, the mine-action community has had to-by-by-crafted an informal set of global support networks available to the landmine-impacted countries. Donor states, the United Nations, major non-governmental organizations, regional organizations and corporations have formed a complex network of interrelated activities to help these countries.

But the concept of building national independence from without—that is, by external forces—is tenuous at best. National ownership implies sovereignty and independence; yet foreign technical advisors, donor representatives, U.N. field workers, guest military and diplomats are often inserted into the process, sometimes culturally clouding the issue of national independence even while striving mightily to help develop strong national capabilities.

The above situation is the worst-case scenario. Reports at both the most recent International Meeting of Mine Action Programme Directors and U.N. Advisors in July and Ottawa Convention States Parties Meeting in September suggest a significant number of impacted governments are just “not there” when it comes to accepting national ownership. The United Nations, United States, European Union and other donors and advisors would like to drop off the engine, but often they are alone in the cab and cannot take the risk of leaving the engine unattended.

Mainstreaming

If mine action is a viable and valid humanitarian endeavor, it be for intensive global efforts, it is because it is tied to the concepts of development, infrastructure, stability, confidence and security. In other words, it is the individual tragedies of landmine accidents, while emotionally compelling, pale in numerical comparison to other threats (AIDS, malnutrition, factional violence, motor vehicle accidents, etc.) which individually claim far greater numbers of victims than do landmines.

Landmine action, therefore, should be given priority consideration among other national programs to the extent that it supports socioeconomic development. Ah, but the rub comes when trying to disengage the highly successful mine-action juggernaut, which has carved out such a huge niche in defining its role among donors, non-governmental organizations, diplomats, journalists, governments and a worldwide publicfollowing, and fit it into a larger and less discrete development program. Many in the world of railroads were able to turn the chronic to over to development officials and more toward the track of the train, out of sight of the engine, gauges and view ahead. Their motives may range from the altruistic to the purely selfish, but their concerns are real nevertheless.

Development plans and officials are not always enamored with or cognizant of the complexities of mine action, nor are donors necessarily eager to pledge funds to support activities other than those specifically earmarked for mine-action projects. It remains for them in the global community to foster vehicles such as the Millennium Development Goals to promote settings to tolerate risks in an environment of trust and comfort in which mine-action activities can be integrated with other projects and programs.

Landmines and Other Explosive Remnants of War

To achieve any end, we must first determine what we are impeding our way. The great railroad planners were able to scout ahead and surmise the challenges that terrain, indigenous populations and climate would pose. In the area of mine action, we were forced to add more and more threats to the initial concerns that began with the singular task of finding anti-personnel landmines.

We realized that battlefield or sandbox exercise and training often unexposed. Planners had to be cautious of ammunition, small arms and light weapons, hooby traps, and improvised explosive devices could each be part of a post-conflict environment. While the Ottawa Convention is concerned solely with APLs, countries at risk have to deal realistically with all potential explosive remnants of war. The landmine strategy has been successful, but it still needs to address the question of the growing threat of other EWR.

Some, such as Tim Carstairs of Mines Advisory Group, argue that the mined weapon consideration must be taken into account and that donors and policy makers must abandon the concept that landmines, small arms and light weapons, UXO, etc., must be considered and planned together in order to assure that the land is indeed safe and preparation for subsistence and development is assured.

The good news is that many organizations, such as the European Commission, the U.N. Mine Action Service and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining have taken the pragmatic step of including broader EWR considerations into mandates to support mine action, and some countries such as Cambodia have adopted a holistic approach to post-conflict EWR threats. The bad news is that our political focus must deal separately with APLs and EWR as defined by the Ottawa Convention and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

Release of Land

When humanitarian demining was beginning as a new movement, it developed an admirable method for trying to identify mined areas—which after all, is the precursor to dealing with the landmine threat. Impact surveys were instituted in most countries at risk from APLs. Based on these surveys, suspected mined areas were identified. Predictably, in an effort not to pass over contaminated areas, many more suspected mine areas were identified than were in reality seeded with mines. It now appears that upwards of 90 percent of “mines” and resources are being spent in areas where there are no mines.

It will require imagination and courage to deal with this situation, but the cold, hard fact is that massive quantum leaps are declared out of bounds, which is a major factor keeping developing countries from expanding education, trade, agriculture and other development. For NGOs, with a mixture of identifying and releasing the wrongly identified land will require considering such ideas as tolerable risk, implementing new and improved techniques of information gathering, or involving scientists and reclassifying land under review, immediately placing land declared “released” from threat into productive use. Nergaard recommends greater use of technical research and geographic information systems polygon-control measures to take some of the guesswork out of release. He accepts the fact that liability, risk and standards will come into play but insists these concepts are simply human to be faced. Others will not accept such an interpretation because they believe it is not tolerable to risk conflicts with a perceived “mine-free” scenario called for by the Ottawa Convention.

More consideration of these concepts, especially the various aspects of risk management and risk tolerance, is being undertaken by Howard Bach and Tim Lardner of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, and we eagerly anticipate their further research.

Mine-free; Impact-free

Perhaps the most basic prerequisite to having a safe and effective railroad journey is fixing a definite schedule and timetabled. While it is not difficult to think of boarding a train without either passenger or engineer aware of its destination, this is the plight that many...
The Rise of ERW as a Threat to Civilians

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the world has witnessed several destructive and deadly wars. Two of the most horrific were the First and Second World Wars, during which explosives, engines, rockets and shells were used wildly. Many people died and large amounts of property were destroyed. Of great concern is that a significant number of people continue to be at risk due to the existence of thousands of explosive remnants of war, including landmines, resulting from these and other conflicts.

To some degree, landmines are losing their importance in the face of the new trends in military tactics, as can be observed in the recent massive military campaigns in Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Lebanon, for these conflicts. These landmines have essentially been led as air strikes rather than ground attacks. This change in tactics produces a complicated situation in which children and other non-civilians civilians increasingly have to deal with a large quantity of unexploded debris (missiles, shells, rockets, bombs, engines) right in their own communities and homes. This new environment of the battlefield contributes to worsening significantly the living situations for civilians—buildings and bridges are destroyed; many lives spread due to the presence of innumerable ammunition and explosives or flames; broken iron and glass litter communities; people suffer a loss of electricity due to the destruction of electric power stations etc.

Consequently, the civilian population while managing a conflict nowadays should be the most important activity in the mine-action process. Otherwise, the most probable scenario is that the armed conflict will end but the地说 crisis in the aftermath of war.

The two World Wars gave landmines an important tactical role. The combination of tank and air strikes was a crucial strategic principle for success during these wars. At the same time, in order to protect one's own position from the infantry's attack or an armoured assault, the tank crews would place landmines in front of their tanks, and some were used as an efficient way to harass the enemy, defend one's own location, cover one's troops from attackers and reinforce one's military equipment. They were an important component of the tactical maneuver used that included artillery strikes, aircraft hits, and armoured and infantry actions.

As time went on, the effectiveness of tanks and new weapons lessened the need for landmines as a solution against armoured attacks. For instance, during World War II the Italian, British and German forces all laid huge landmines in northern Africa, but the mines weren't as effective as in the past because the tanks used by the military could roll right over them without being affected. Because so many mines were emplaced, huge quantities of landmines and ERW remained today.

Increased Use of Missiles and Ordnance in the Gulf Wars

On 15 January 1991, U.N. Coalition Forces launched air raids on Iraq, but the ground attack did not begin until 24 February. This situation reflects how the previously important role of the tank in warfare has lessened and how mines as well have lost some of their value as a weapon in armed conflict. With battle tactics shifting to the air with such warplanes as the F-117 and B-52 and other aerial vectors that drop immense quantities of bombs and rockets on the battlefield, the front line has changed. Increasingly sophisticated weaponry, such as the Patriot missile, and other means of aerial attack and defense were used in the first Gulf War and since to gain a strategic advantage. The resulting destruction from these tactics is systematic, leading to massive collateral damage on the ground.

The tactics of modern warfare have continued to involve more ERW than mines, as seen in the March 2003 invasion of Baghdad, Iraq, during which Coalition Forces dropped munitions from the air in huge quantities. As a result, the incidence of ERW has grown significantly, while the use of landmines is decreasing. Additionally, Iraq has seen a large increase in the use of improvised bombs, missiles and other explosive devices by non-state actors, leading again to an increased threat of harm from ERW.

As a result, ERW—instead of mines—are now the biggest threat to civilians; indeed, this shift in warfare highlights the need for a new approach to understanding and addressing the very real consequences of ERW for civilians in the aftermath of war.