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The Rise of ERW as a Threat to Civilians

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mine-action managers find themselves faced with today. In the simplest of all strategy formulas, we ask “Where are we? Where do we want to go? How do we get there?” If we do not know where we want to go, no effective strategy can be planned, and we will surely never reach our goal.

Many signatories have emphasized their position at each of the seven Convention Review Conferences that “impact free” just does not measure up to the specific requirements of Article 5. However, the European Community’s “is to dramatically reduce the lingering threat and impact of landmine action” is set out in Bob Kealey’s article, “Are We Setting the Wrong Targets?”2 It makes a logical assumption that an end-state should be defined as being “the point where there is no economic demand for the land left undamaged and where all reasonable and practicable steps have also been taken to prevent casualties in the areas that remain contaminated.”3 Kealey continues to have the courage to face this issue head on and modify Article 5 of the Ottawa Convention.

Whether the Mine-Action Express? Never before in the short history of mine action have there been so many emerging ideas and opportunities for improvements and enhancements to mine action. But neither have there been so many distractions and competing ideas. There is no authoritative methodology to make decisions for us. Just as we have had to build mine action through coordination and sometimes informal actions in the past, we will have to achieve consensus in the future. Selecting, combining, designing and engineering the way ahead will be difficult—and probably painful. The goal is to stay calm, stay focused, and continue working that will operate efficiently and powerfully in dealing with one of the great pervasive threats of the 21st century: post-conflict contamination.

See Evidence, page 109

Photo courtesy of Geoff Cryer, www.geoffspages.co.uk

The.methods used in warfare have changed over the years, leaving new threats to civilians, such as these plastic landmines planted in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia.

In this article, the author looks at the rise of landmines and ERW as military tactics from the First World War to current conflicts. The safety risk their presence poses and various measures to protect civilians are also discussed.

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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 explosions, engines, rockets and shells were used widely. 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 example. These conflicts have essentially been led as air strikes rather than ground attacks. This change in tactics produces a complicated situation in which children and other innocent civilians increasingly have to deal with a large quantity of unexploded debris (mines, shells, rockets, bombs, engines) right in their own communities and homes. This new environment of the battlefield contributes to worsening significantly the living situation for civilians—buildings and bridges are destroyed; many fires spread due to the presence of incombustible ammunition and explosives; broken iron and glass limit communities; people suffer a loss of electricity due to the destruction of electric power mains, etc.

Consequently, civilian protection during a conflict nowadays should be the most important activity in the mine-action process. Otherwise, the most vulnerable population groups may be willfully or killed simply because they find themselves near military targets during air strikes, and later because of the potentially huge and unfortunate ERW risks that will be difficult to overcome. 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, it is important to protect one’s own position from the infantry’s attack or an armoured assault, the strategy leading to the need for armoured minesfields. Both 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 matrix 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 minesfields as a solution against armoured attacks. For instance, during World War II the Italian, British and German forces all laid montages of 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 employed, huge quantities of landmines and ERW remain 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 vehicles that drop immense quantities of bombs and rockets on the body of the urbanized have changed. Increasingly sophisticated weaponry, such as the Patriot missile, 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 large quantities. As a result, the incidence of ERW has grown significantly, while the use of landmines is decreasing. In addition, 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 address the dangerous and very real consequences of ERW for civilians in the aftermath of war.

Case in Point: Recent Conflict in Lebanon

The 34-day conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon that ended 14 August 2006, involved a deployment of explosive weapons
The report can be downloaded at http://snipurl.com/xiy4. If you would like a printed copy of the report, please contact the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) Secretariat.

Four topics were discussed in working groups during the workshop:

1. Humanitarian law
2. Human-rights law
3. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
4. Transition into governance roles

The final report from the conference, which presents information and analyses that came out of these four thematic working groups, is available in English and will soon be available in French. The report can be downloaded at http://snipurl.com/xiy4. If you would like a printed copy of the report, please contact the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) Secretariat.

The original intention for standards such as the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) was that they should form a baseline by which pragmatic implementation of a foundation of “standards” would take into account the particular situation in each affected country. However, recent interpretations of the text illustrate that the IMAS have now become a vehicle for those who wish to impose standards. The cost of some projects has been dramatically increased by those using IMAS as a quality-assurance/quality-control vehicle to increase demands on or delay the work; whether through a lack of understanding, a difference in interpretation of the text or by design. In some cases, the IMAS documents seem to confuse rather than clarify uncertainty and a plethora of paperwork. In specific areas—assessment and survey—the IMAS appear to have lost direction.

The aims and objectives of these standards (and the number of other documents and references) made throughout the IMAS are the subject of this article.

The authors present a critique of the International Mine Action Standards currently in use. After highlighting gaps in IMAS related to assessment and survey, an improved aspect of mine-action planning methodology is presented, which includes a prioritization component using a socioeconomic approach. The result is LIRA: landmine impact combined with a new measurement of risk assessment. This updated model can contribute to improved safety, quality and productivity of landmine action through more effective strategic planning tools.

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