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News Briefs

News Brief

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Journal of Mine Action

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News Briefs

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1. Investment in Cluster-bomb Manufacturers Criminalized

Belgium is the first country to criminalize the investment in companies that make cluster bombs. The Belgian Senate passed legislation in early March to make such investment illegal and the Parliament will publish a list of companies that manufacture cluster bombs. Several Belgian banks terminated their investments in such companies, as the new law prohibits Belgian banks from owning shares in cluster-bomb manufacturers or offering them credit.

More than 40 countries have pledged to develop new international agreements to ban the use of cluster bombs by 2008. Belgium was also the first country to entirely ban cluster munitions, which at least 23 countries have used.

2. New Bug-like Demining Robots Tested in Arizona

Explosives investigation is a common task for remotely operated robots, but Mark Tilden has developed a new kind of robot with a unique approach to explosives. The robotics physicist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory built a demining robot resembling a stick insect that is nearly autonomous.

The insect-robot recently participated in a live-fire test at the Yuma Test Grounds in Arizona and performed well, according to reports. The robot sought out landmines, purposefully stepping on a mine and losing one of its many legs. When it lost a limb, the robot simply picked itself up and readjusted to move on its remaining legs through the minefield.

Left with only one leg, the machine continued to pull itself forward and demine the field. At this point, the Army colonel in charge of the test ordered the exercise stopped.

The colonel, it seemed, could not watch the scorched, crippled robot dragging itself through the desert minefield with just one leg. He said the test was just too inhumane.

3. Canadian Mine Survivor Gets Custom Motorcycle

When Canadian Master Corporal Jody Mitic lost both his feet after stepping on a landmine in Afghanistan, Mitic never thought he would be able to ride a motorcycle again. After months in recovery at Toronto's St. John's Rehabilitation Hospital, Mitic had two new prosthetic feet and was walking with just a cane but still had little hope of ever riding a motorcycle. Having contacted the Barrie Harley dealership before his accident about purchasing a bike, Mitic had to write back and say, "Things have changed."

Owners of the Harley Davidson in Barrie, Ontario, Canada, presented Mitic with a custom-made chopper in April. Community organizers heard of Mitic's situation and raised more than CN\$50,000 (US\$46,790) for the custom bike, which includes a hand-operated shifter and a hand brake that works both the front and rear brakes. To supplement the funding, bike builders from the Barrie Harley dealership donated 260 hours in labor to build Mitic's perfect custom Harley.

4. Angolan Landmine Commission Establishes Monitoring Team

The Coordinator of the Provincial Commission on Landmine Action and Humanitarian Aid (CNIDAH) in Huambo, Angola, announced the formation of a team to monitor demining methods by the end of 2007. Agostinho Njaka said the team will work in heavily mined provinces like Bailundo, Huambo, Katchiungo and Tchicala-Tcholohanga. The team will evaluate demining policies and strategies with the goal of alleviating long delays in monitoring the quality of cleared areas. The team members will be incorporated into the demining process as soon as possible and will facilitate clearance operations for the opening of new roads and farmland.

5. "Helpful Friend" Establishes Eco-friendly Rehab Center

Helpful Friend, an organization working to address the problem of landmines and meet the needs of mine victims in Nepal, is establishing an eco-friendly rehabilitation center outside the capital city of Kathmandu. The center will be based on HF's property in Kakani village. Construction work is expected to be finished by the end of August and the property open for business in January 2008.

Initially 20 people will be admitted to the center, where they will produce organic vegetables to make the center self-sustaining and provide meaningful labor to the patients. Traditional Nepali cottages from different ethnic groups will be constructed on-site to cater to local expatriates, tourists and other travelers. The center plans to be an eco-tourist site, expanding its appeal with opportunities for bird-watching and pony-trekking.

Residents will not only work on the organic farm but also take advantage of the center's fishery. They will produce handicrafts and other products such as pottery, jewelry, bamboo products and handmade Nepali paper for center use and profit. Power at the center will be provided by solar panels and cooking will be done using bio-gas.

Visit www.helpfulfriend.org or e-mail info@helpfulfriend.org for more information.

6. Burmese Separatist Group Signs Statement Against Landmines

The National Democratic Front of Burma signed a statement against landmine use at its January 2007 Central Executive Committee meeting. The statement directs various member organizations, which claim landmines are an effective self-defense tactic, to find ways to minimize mine use.

The NDF also directs members to apply strict usage rules, regulate/supervise mine activity and ensure villagers in NDF

areas are not harmed by the use of landmines. Formed in 1976, the NDF is an umbrella organization for armed opposition groups of Burma/Myanmar's various ethnic nationalities. More than 2,000 people are thought to be members of the National Democratic Front.

7. Polisario Front Destroys More Landmines

In late February 2007, a mine-action team working with the *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro* (Polisario Front), a separatist group seeking independence of Western Sahara from Morocco, destroyed 3,321 anti-personnel landmines in Tifarti, Western Sahara. This event represented the organization's second stockpile destruction since November 2005, when it signed Geneva Call's "Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Antipersonnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action," a document by which armed rebel groups and other non-state actors show support for a landmine ban.

By signing the Deed of Commitment, the PF has agreed to destroy all AP mines in its possession and work with mine-action efforts in the areas it controls. Mine action has been successful in the region due in large part to PF's commitment to the destruction of its landmine stockpile. Polisario Front has also done work with surveying and explosive-ordnance disposal, and a prosthetics workshop it supports is expected to open in Saharawi refugee camps.

8. UK Orders Partial Ban on Cluster Munitions

The government of the United Kingdom announced in late March that it will ban the use of so-called "dumb" cluster munitions. Effective immediately, the United Kingdom will no longer use the two types of cluster munitions it possesses that do not have self-destruct capabilities.

The United Kingdom used the two types—the RBL 755 aerial bomb and the M26 ground rockets for multiple-launch rocket systems—in previous military engagements. Besides being used by various parties in Iraq in 2003, Kosovo in 1991 and the 1991 Persian Gulf War, stockpiles of these same weapons are held by numerous countries. For example, the M26 is held by Bahrain, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Turkey and the United States.

Despite the ban on the use of these two kinds of cluster munitions, the United Kingdom will continue to use its L20A1 155 mm artillery projectiles with M85 submunitions. These devices have self-destruct capabilities.

9. Cambodia to Host WOVD Volleyball World Cup

From 24 November to 2 December 2007, Cambodia will host the World Organization of Volleyball for the Disabled's World Volleyball Cup in Phnom Penh. The tournament is the first-ever world cup team sports event to be hosted by Cambodia. The WOVD World Cup will raise global awareness about the landmine issue. At least 12 nations are expected to attend.

The Cambodian disabled volleyball team is currently ranked first in the Asia-Pacific region and fourth in the world. The majority of the athletes are landmine survivors. Established in 2002, the Cambodian National Volleyball League for the Disabled remains one of the few professionally managed league-based sports programs in the country.

For more information on the tournament, visit www.volleyballworldcup2007.com. Information on the Cambodian team can be found at www.standupcambodia.org.

10. New Campaign Providing High-tech Equipment to U.N.

The Schonstedt Instrument Company, based in West Virginia, recently partnered with the United Nations Mine Action Team to provide high-tech equipment to deminers around the world through its "Buy a Schonstedt, Save a Life" campaign.

Eric Schonstedt founded the company in 1953 using skills and techniques he learned during World War II. Since that

time, the Schonstedt Instrument Company has become renowned for the production of hand-held magnetic locators, known formally as magnetometers or gradiometers.

In addition to helping locate explosive remnants of war, the devices have myriad applications, including helping Scandinavians find fire hydrants buried in snow, utility workers find manhole covers and archaeologists locate underwater relics and ships.

Military personnel have been using the devices extensively in their search for unexploded ordnance and ERW in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. In an effort to boost sales of its pipe and cable locators, the company established a philanthropic campaign to benefit the UNMAT.

For every pipe and cable locator purchased through the company, UNMAT will receive a magnetic locator donated in the customer's name. UNMAT will then distribute the locators to the areas with the most need. No limit has been placed on the number of locators that can be donated.

The first shipment of between 15 and 20 locators went to the International Mine Action Training Centre in Nairobi, Kenya. The joint British and Kenyan school trains students for humanitarian demining. For more information, visit <http://www.schonstedt.com/index.cfm?page=savealife>.

11. SRSA Recruits Female Clearance Team

With approximately one million unexploded cluster bomblets littering southern Lebanon, the Swedish Rescue Services Agency has tapped an unconventional source of labor: all-female battle-area clearance teams. Until very recently, service on BAC teams has been an all-male operation. Women have served only as BAC team medics for nongovernmental organizations like Norwegian People's Aid.

Work on BAC teams is difficult and dangerous and involves hours of painstaking labor in heavy protective gear. Members of the teams have a starting salary of about US\$700 per month. This salary is nearly triple the amount most Lebanese make through service jobs, making these temporary employment positions very desirable.

Despite compensation, some relatives are reluctant to consent to this type of work for women because of safety concerns. In a region where society places a high value on tradition and the family, these concerns are not taken lightly. Still, SRSA hopes the opportunity will tap into this "new" source of labor.

12. Gender and Mine Action Subject of Global Survey

The Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines announced the launch of a global survey to understand the role of gender in the impact of mines and efficacy of mine action. This study is the first of its kind to seek comprehensive global information on gender and landmines.

To collect this information, the survey will target international organizations, local nongovernmental organizations, government ministries, mine-action donors, the United Nations' agencies and civil-society organizations. Information on the impact of mines on men, women and children will be solicited. Questionnaires will be distributed in English, French and Spanish.

Information gathered through the survey will be used to develop a toolkit for giving mine-action providers context-specific guidelines to integrating gender into mine action.

For more information, contact Programme Officer Gemma Huckerby at g.huckerby@scbl-gender.ch.

13. Hot Weather Blamed for Explosions at Munitions Dumps

The Thai Army claims that hot weather caused the blasts that led to more than 30 minutes of continuous explosions at

two army munitions dumps. The dumps, in Lop Buri's Muang district, are located near military residences and hundreds of families had to be evacuated, although there were no casualties or reported property damage.

The first explosion began around 8 p.m. at a Thai Army Ordnance Department dump storing small-arms munitions. The fire and heat from this initial blast apparently triggered the explosions at a nearby dump owned by the Army's Aviation Center. A stockpile of rockets and large explosives was located at the second dump.

Army Commander General Sonthi Boonyarat-glin later blamed the initial explosion on the hot weather and dismissed speculation of sabotage.

14. Landmine Destruction Will Cost Turkey US\$450 Million

The Turkish Finance Ministry estimates it will cost US\$350–450 million to clear minefields in accordance with the Ottawa Convention, which directs States Parties to destroy landmine stockpiles within four years and remove and destroy emplaced mines within 10 years.

Turkey signed the document in 2003, and in accordance with the Convention, Turkey has until 2014 to destroy all mines within its borders. To date, the country, which is thought to have nearly one million mines in its border regions, has destroyed approximately 11,000 mines. Clearance costs have risen because the maps to some minefields have been lost.

The majority of mines were emplaced along the Turkish-Syrian border to prevent illegal immigration and the infiltration of the banned Kurdish Workers' Party. While the border with Syria is 600 kilometers (373 miles) long, Turkey's entire border covers more than 2,000 kilometers (1,243 miles). To clear the minefields along the Syrian border, Turkey will need more than \$36 million.

According to official data, nearly 600 people—both soldiers and civilians—have been killed and 1,500 soldiers and 700 civilians have been injured by landmine explosions between 1993 and 2003.

15. Joint Statement Issued on Gender and Mine Action

In recognition of the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action (April 4), the Informal Working Group on Gender and Mine Action and the Gender and Mine Action Programme of the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines issued a joint statement to reiterate the importance of gender considerations in mine action.

The groups said they are convinced that "mainstreaming gender into mine action policy and programming will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of operations." The statement also urged actors in the mine-action community to support this goal by incorporating gender issues into data gathering, mine-risk education and all other aspects of clearance and demining.

A significant factor in the impact of mines and other explosive remnants of war, gender often contributes to increased difficulty surrounding landmine casualties. Female landmine survivors are at risk for divorce or abandonment if their ability to engage in labor and childrearing is compromised. While men and boys are more likely to be involved in landmine accidents, women frequently become the sole providers for their families if a spouse is injured. Women also may be affected by inadequate victim assistance in situations in which men are considered typical primary income providers.

Six members of the Informal Working Group on Gender and Mine Action and four other groups endorsed the statement. For more information on the statement and the work of the IWGG, contact Gemma Huckerby at g.huckerby@scbl-gender.ch.

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