

# Contributing to Progress in Sri Lanka

This article highlights the activities of People to People International in Sri Lanka. As part of its commitment to Sri Lanka, PTPI not only assisted in the clearance of high-priority minefields, but also provided aid following the 2004 tsunami. Today, PTPI remains dedicated to helping the of Sri Lankan people.

by Liz Wegman [ People to People International ]

People to People International was founded by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956 and is now led by his granddaughter. Working with The HALO Trust, a nonprofit organization specializing in the removal of war debris, PTPI has cleared 13 high-priority minefields totaling 9,292 square meters (2.3 acres) and containing nearly 600 mines in Sri Lanka since joining the U.S. Department of State's Public-Private Partnership Program for Mine Action in 2002, according to Mary Jean Eisenhower, President and CEO of PTPI. People to People has embraced Sri Lanka and become a major contributor to the rebuilding of a country wracked by both manmade and natural disasters.

Today PTPI remains committed to helping Sri Lanka achieve its identified goal of becoming "mine free," thereby making it easier for the thousands of civilians who were displaced or forced out by the conflict to resettle in their homes and resume cultivating their land. In addition, PTPI has built three schools in the Jaffna area, which was hit hard by the December 2004 tsunami.

The 20 years of civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam<sup>2</sup> took place mainly in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, home to a significant number of ethnic Tamils. Both the Sri Lankan Army and the LTTE used mines extensively throughout the conflict. The HALO Trust established an operations base in the northern Jaffna district, where the landmine problem is most significant. Its focus is government-controlled areas, though it does provide assistance in LTTE-controlled areas on request.

Mary Eisenhower and PTPI's Deputy CEO Marc Bright made their first trip to Sri Lanka in late 2003 to visit the Jaffna region. Struck by the beautiful scenery left desolate because of the risks posed by mines, they returned with an increased determination to raise the funds necessary to finance a demining team.

Also in 2003, the government of Sri Lanka declared its goal of becoming a mine-free country within three years. The expansion of capacity needed to meet this goal is progressing more slowly than anticipated, forcing the date to be set back. Total clearance of high-priority areas, however, is achievable in 2007.

The goal set for PTPI's project included clearance of 13 minefields, all of which are high-priority sites. Areas where landmines lay in close proximity or denied access to schools were of main concern.

The first two cleared minefields were in the village of Chirupiddi, approximately seven miles (11 kilometers) north of Jaffna town. It is a naturally fertile area—one of the best on the Jaffna peninsula. The soil allows several crops to be grown in rotation annually and the need to



restore arable farmland was urgent. The demining team cleared two minefields of 341 mines, and farmers have subsequently returned to the land.

Next, the team moved 12 miles (19 kilometers) northwest of Jaffna to the village of Siruvilan. Sri Lankan security forces seized this area in 1992, which led to the displacement of many citizens in the area. Previously, the land belonged to 70 people who mainly engaged in farming. In an area of 927 square meters (0.23 acre), the team cleared 62 mines.

The deminers also began clearing a minefield that lay in close proximity to a primary school. The minefield was separated from the school by nothing more than an old military defense line formed by a mound of dirt. It also denied access to agricultural land and blocked resettlement. Several accidents, some resulting in casualties, have taken place in the area.

Clearance of the premises of a second school followed, this time in Alaveddi village. The number of students had decreased dramatically due to injuries on school grounds. In total, 14 mines were removed from the area, restoring it to a usable state.

The second minefield in the Alaveddi northern region lay in another area captured by Sri Lankan Security Forces. People had been permitted to resettle in the region in 1992, but livestock were often injured or killed by remaining mines in the years prior to the clearance of the area. A total of 399 square meters (0.1 acre) was cleared, and 14 mines were found and destroyed.

The team then moved on to clear two minefields in the high-priority area of Ilavalai. This village is located just before the entrance to the Military High Security Zone. An estimated 2,000 mines had been laid in the area by the SLA since 1995. The local population was



Mary Eisenhower on a visit to Sri Lanka.

in desperate need of land as houses were being built closer and closer to the minefield. Once the field was demined, it was put to use immediately for planting, grazing and transit to other agricultural areas.

Several schools in the same area were situated on or near LTTE-laid minefields, with no records available of where mines

were laid. Mine removal within these fields required total clearance to a depth of about six inches (15 centimeters). In the Illavalai area, 74 mines were removed from an area of 1,218 square meters (0.3 acre).

The final project for the PTPI-funded section was at the Manthikai School in northeast Jaffna. There, an SLA minefield crossed a path that was used by over 400 schoolchildren each day; clearing it restored confidence in safety to the local residents.

Eisenhower returned to Sri Lanka in 2005. While it was difficult to see the physical effects of the progress made by PTPI's demining team, the effects of the 2004 tsunami were readily apparent. The Jaffna region was one of the hardest hit. Land around the schools may have been cleared of mines, but the schools themselves were swept away. Eisenhower soon realized that the contributions made to PTPI's Tsunami Relief Fund would be best put to use in Sri Lanka by continuing to assist the people of the country on the road to normal life in their native land. In less than a year, three new schools were built in the Jaffna region. Eisenhower and Bright returned a third time in April 2006 for the schools' dedication ceremonies. ♦

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Since 2003, Liz Wegman has played an active role in spreading People to People International's mission of promoting peace, understanding and tolerance around the globe through the organization's many projects and programs. She currently serves as the Managing Director of PTPI's Operation Iraqi Children program and handles public relations for the organization.

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## News Brief

### Sweden Supports OAS

The government of Sweden provided US\$800,000 to the Organization of American States to support demining work in Nicaragua. The grant will also support a mine-risk education program, "Safe Step without Mines," and rehabilitation/reintegration services for landmine victims.

Operations made possible by the grant from the Swedish International Development Agency will be coordinated through the OAS Mine Action Program. The donation will advance the Nicaraguan National Demining Plan by about 90 percent.

The OAS reports that, in 1990, more than 550,000 Nicaraguans lived within five kilometers (three miles) of a landmine-infested area; currently, fewer than 45,000 people live under those conditions.

The OAS is considering an expansion of rehabilitation and social reintegration programs because of strong financial support from nations such as Canada, Italy, Norway, Sweden and the United States. If enlarged, the programs would not only serve greater numbers in Nicaragua but also neighboring Honduras.