Protecting vulnerable human populations. The ICBL has done a great service in raising awareness about the damage caused by landmines. Much of their work rests on the fact that mines do not discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. As we know, the damage extends beyond the physical injuries they cause. The social stigma and the added economic burden that a loss of a productive person creates for victims and their families is additional harm. Further harm results from not actual detonations, but from the belief that landmines are present. The threat of mines blocks access to vital resources such as land, water, housing, public buildings, infrastructure and transport. Avoiding injury requires curtailing or refraining from securing subsistence or additional economic productivity. To make matters worse, mined roads prevent the transport of goods once collected or grown, thereby preventing income and trade.

However, while landmines can be used by someone on the outside to keep a group contained within a confined territory, so too can they be used to protect a group within a circumscribed territory by keeping dangerous persons out. Landmines were originally intended for purposes of defense, the fact that some now use them on the offense does not mean that landmines cease to play this defensive role.

Protecting vulnerable populations from armed forces. Whether or not one believes a line between combatants and non-combatants can or should be maintained, the fact is many aggressive parties are willing to force non-combatants into their conflicts. Whether the non-combatants are “innocent” or are implicated by association and by providing indirect support to combatants, they require defense. To the extent landmines help to provide that defense, they protect civilians and farmers, etc., those people who tend to be the focal point of the humanitarian campaign to ban landmines.

If we take the moral argument against all landmine use seriously, then we have to conclude that it is wrong to use mines to defend these populations. If we join supporters of the ICBL in stigmatizing landmine use, we must also stigmatize people who want to defend these populations. We would have to stigmatize people who are glad mines are used to defend them from rape and murder. We would have to stigmatize families of soldiers who are glad that their spouses and children have one more means of ensuring that they come home. Suppose for the moment the choice to use mines is mistaken. Even so, what this war aims is education, not vilification. But there are many cases where the choice to use mines was not mistaken: the choice to use mines saved lives. For instance, it was thick belts of landmines that protected thousands of residents in Sarajevo from meeting the same fate as Strohbronn. Perhaps next to the photos of people who were injured by landmines, we should add the photos of women and girls who were not raped, and fathers and sons who were not removed in the night.

Self-defense of vulnerable populations. Although proponents of the ICBL often work in or come from countries afflicted by landmines, the framework that they have developed does not seem to take into account all that it should. There is something wrong with the strategy to the extent that it includes vilifying those who try to protect parties who do not wish to be included in conflicts. But perhaps an even more troubling problem pertains to cases of landmine use, which the general public tends not to hear about. The way one learns of these cases is by speaking to people in the field: denominational leaders and the people who live there. Consider the following example:

Cambodians have endured a longstanding problem with bandits. Kidnappings are associated with the Khmer Rouge received amnesty but are now dismissed as a thing of the past. At least some of the deminers who were working in Cambodia in the 1990s know that at times it was the villagers who were laying mines to protect themselves from attack and theft by dispersed Khmer Rouge and other bandits. Travel Web sites assure us that it is now safe to travel to Cambodia. Perhaps for tourists, it is.

Let us return to the case of Sarajevo. Deminers are currently assayed by maps showing where conflicting armies deployed mines. However, their mission is considerably more difficult because not all mines were deployed by military forces. Those who were not mined by the military but rather by civilians themselves. One example is that of houses and gardens, more or less isolated, that were mined by their owners for protection from fear of being attacked. The minefields of Sarajevo, in reality, are many more than those marked on the maps. These were civilians using mines to protect themselves while United Nations peacekeepers watched as everything these citizens held dear was being destroyed.

Conclusion. To demonize landmines per se is to demonstrate not only the guerillas and the oppressive regimes that are effectively judged by their aims and methods anyway. There are people who use mines for their own defense in the longstanding absence of adequate protection from gunpoint, the military and even the United Nations. To pretend that landmines do not serve those purposes is to obfuscate the conditions of the vulnerable populations who are compelled to use them to defend themselves when no one else will.

Although people who oppose all landmine use have not caused the acute problems faced by vulnerable communities, I would suggest that the stifling of debate and the willful overlooking of such cases impedes them in terms of skewing our response to these communities. It’s not enough to conclude that landmines for self-protection, they must be particularly vulnerable. When the self-appointed authorities on the matter fail to acknowledge such cases exist, it makes sound like there are no such cases, renders the extent of their vulnerability invisible. And when we pretend landmines never help, we worsen the situation of some communities. Because by denying them recourse to an effective tool, we make them more vulnerable. And by denying ourselves recourse to an effective tool, we make it easier to give ourselves permission to claim that there is nothing we can do either.

See Endnotes, page 109

A Firm Foothold: RONCO Operations in Sudan

Over the past four years, RONCO has established a continuing presence in Sudan, following the Nuba Mountains ceasefire, with the deployment of quick-response teams to conduct emergency mine-clearance tasks. Currently, RONCO is creating and sustaining an indigenous mine clearance, survey and disposal capacity in southern Sudan on behalf of the United Nations. In addition to the threat of extensively mined roads and infrastructure, RONCO had to overcome a number of obstacles; including inclement weather, disease and an increasing security threat due to rebel activity. Sudan’s austere and hostile conditions are not dissimilar to those RONCO experienced in Afghanistan and Iraq, but as RONCO has discovered in those two countries, the long-term impact of the work far outweighs its challenges.

by John Lundberg [ RONCO Consulting Corporation ]

Sudan presents a variety of problems for mine action operations. Control of the country, which had been at war since 1983, is now divided between the Sudanese government and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Movement (SPLM/A), with government forces claiming the majority of the north and both sides maintaining some control in the south. Both the government and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army used landmines throughout the civil war and as a result, landmines now pose a serious threat to civilians. For example, the United Nations reports that in 2004, landmines were responsible for more than 15 deaths and 50 injuries. The actual number of deaths and injuries has likely been higher but gone unreported due to the difficulty of access throughout much of the south.
Internally displaced persons facing conflict areas such as the Darfur region are at particular risk because they have little or no knowledge of potential threats and are often forced to move regardless of the potential landmine problem.

Both the Sudanese government and the SPLA have accepted assistance from the United Nations, which is in the process of implementing a plan to eliminate Sudan’s landmine threat. In 2002, the United Nations established the National Mine Action Office in Khartoum, along with regional offices in central and southern Sudan, and various initiatives that spanned throughout the entire country. From these locations, the United Nations carried out assessments, including a landmine clearance, mine-risk education, survivor assistance and stockpile destruction. The United Nations was responsible for coordinating these efforts and helping build a lasting mine-action presence in the region. Unfortunately, operations have often been interrupted by the ongoing conflict.

Following the most recent peace-agreement agreements between the government and the SPLA in January 2005, the United Nations moved quickly to establish the U.N. Advance Mission in Sudan with the goal of helping to ensure a lasting peace. It was quickly realized that mine-affected roads severely curtailed relief efforts and prevented development aid from reaching its destination, also hampering access to emergency and relief activities and affecting the food supply of more than two million people.

The RONCO Response

As a result of the above conditions, in May 2005, the United Nations contracted RONCO to provide the mine-action capacity necessary to support its programs. In response, RONCO deployed two international clearance teams to conduct emergency clearance tasks and a training team to develop a Sudanese demining/explosive ordnance disposal capacity in Waau and Malakal. Local capacity was to be developed in the following areas:

- Emergency EOD
- Mine clearance
- Battle-area clearance
- Barricade and stockpile clearance

RONCO was uniquely prepared to quickly respond to the United Nations’ needs, having extensive experience operating and deploying its Quick Reaction Demining Force, a Montebello-branded team developed to respond to the mine tasks on short notice. RONCO initially deployed this force to Sudan in 2002, following the ceasefire agreement, which agreed to the safe return of internally displaced persons and increased the flow of humanitarian assistance through the Nuba Mountains. But the 2005 Sudanese deployment necessitated a more permanent force and the rapid deployment of local capacity. RONCO’s assistance included a management team, two international clearance teams and two training teams—each complete with medical and support staff, interpreters and all administrative, technical and logistical resources required. In just one month, this force was ready to fully operate in Sudan.

It had established a RONCO office in Khartoum, completed recruitment of local nationals, established two base camps in Malakal and Waau, and begun all training preparations, and completed all certification requirements. Moreover, the force was flexible enough to take on a variety of EOD/demining tasks, quickly and efficiently.

The Challenges of Operating in Sudan

Based on their long history of operating in austere environments, most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, RONCO’s teams were prepared for the challenges of operating in a remote and hostile environment. Nevertheless, operations in southern Sudan proved far from routine, and the difficulties of security, supply, lack of transportation infrastructure and the inhospitable weather proved to be a persistent challenge to RONCO operations in the country. 

Security concerns. The Lord’s Resistance Army, a rebel group that routinely crosses the border from Uganda into southern Sudan, is a serious threat to clear and demining operations in the area. The group recently ambushed a Foundation Sauvage de Déminage convoy near Juba and killed two deminers. As a result, this incident and a continued LRA presence in the area, RONCO was directed to discontinue its forward camp and fall back to its base camp at Juba until the situation stabilized. A number of areas in the south are now considered off limits, and many areas require the presence of armed escorts. As discussed below, concern over the operations of the LRA had a major impact on RONCO’s operations on the Juba-to-Yei road.

Another major security concern arose in August, following the death of Dr. John Garang, the newly elected First Vice President of Sudan. As a result, the United Nations directed RONCO to suspend operations in Malakal for six days. In addition, security authorities were in the area stopping RONCO’s local nationals during their pre-deployment travel to the training/work sites. These precautionary detentions were impacting RONCO’s ability to train and operate. In response, RONCO’s national identity cards for its local nationals to vouch for their deployment.

Supply challenges. Keeping operations supplied is a serious problem in Sudan—hard to get anywhere inside the country and getting there is a complex and expensive, averaging as much as US$.50 per liter (US$0.92 per gallon).

Weather and disease. Weather is a major factor in Sudan, and it can severely hamper operations. The dry season temperatures reach more than 122°F. During this period, excessive heat precluded operations for up to 14 days in June, 10 days in July, 25 days in August and 20 days in September. During the rainy season, dirt roads turn to a thick mud, slowing operations to a crawl and hampering the mobility of all vehicles.

The terrain in southern Sudan also lends itself to flooding. The ground is flat and virtually no natural drainage, and the soil surcharges quickly, resulting in standing water even during the brief periods when it is not raining. At times, some areas have been under as much as six to 10 inches of standing water in Malakal, in particular, the mud made operations almost impossible and the United Nations directed RONCO to stop operations from August through November, forcing the relocation of RONCO’s local nationals from Malakal to the Nuba Mountains. While flooding was not quite as bad in Rumbek, RONCO operations there were shut down due to weather for more than 40 days in 2005. Bruce Burnett, RONCO’s Chief of Party in southern Sudan, summed up the difficulties of the country’s weather: “In the wet season, nothing moves; and in the dry season, the ground is very hard, which makes demining extremely challenging.”

Instructing personnel on the proper use of a malaria prophylaxis has proven to be crucial in maintaining operational tempo. Rain and poisonous snakes are also a serious health hazard; tons that seal at the bottom and top of the road, and sometimes under the road, precluded operations for 1 day due to weather.

Overcoming the Challenges

Historically, RONCO’s experience is that the impact of clearance operations frequently outruns the programs. Despite medical, security, transportation and weather issues, along with extended downtime waiting for the necessary permits for the U.S. Department of State from 2003 to 2005, RONCO cleared thousands of kilometers of roads. Within weeks of clearing the road to Kudru, the population grew from 15 to 90, and the road to Juba may clear, the population grew from 20 to over 100, significant increases that illustrate the importance of mine clearance in allowing refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their homes.

Ronald G. Hendrickson

RONCO’s MDD teams were integrated with manual and mechanical mine clearance operations in Juba and Malakal.