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United States Interagency Team Visits South Africa

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In February 1999, an U.S. interagency team of humanitarian demining experts, including representatives of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, State Department, and U.S. European Command, visited South Africa. The purpose of this visit was to familiarize the team with South African demining research and development (R&D), and operations; and to conduct meetings on possible areas of cooperation between the two countries. This initiative was an outgrowth of the U.S. South Africa Bi-national Commission (BNC), which is chaired by Vice President Al Gore and Deputy President Thabo Mbeki.

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The BNC covers bilateral cooperation across the full spectrum of political, economic, cultural, and security issues. It includes a defense committee, which addresses joint exercises, peacekeeping, equal opportunity in the military, civil-military relations, and environmental security. Last August, a three member South African delegation visited Washington, where they received information on United States Government humanitarian demining programs and policy. They also visited Ft. Belvoir to discuss demining R&D and view demining equipment, and began discussions on bilateral cooperation.



Headquarters of the South African National Defense Force Engineers

South Africa's Role

South Africa plays a unique and interesting role in the world of humanitarian demining. While not a mine-affected country, it has considerable expertise in mine operations (both mine laying and clearing), developed during Cold War era conflicts in Namibia, Angola, and

Mozambique. It is also a world leader in demining R&D and production of equipment, with an especial emphasis on mine proof armored vehicles. South African equipment has been used recently for United Nations demining operations in Angola, and the South African Army provided training in national level demining program management to INAROE, the Angolan demining organization.

Overall, the visit was extremely productive and enlightening. The schedule began in Pretoria, with meetings at the Ministry of National Defence, with representatives of both the civilian Defence Secretariat and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). The U.S. team also visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It became clear that the South African Government, which was also a major player in the process leading to the Ottawa Treaty, views mitigation of the landmine threat as a critical security issue -in the region- and throughout the world. The delegation also had the opportunity to meet with a representative of the South African Campaign to Ban Landmines. He noted that, since the Treaty has been signed, most activists in Africa hope to turn their attention to supporting demining programs. Previously, attention had been directed towards a concerted push for non-signatory states to sign the Ottawa Treaty.

Demining Capabilities

A review of South African demining capabilities, and a history of demining operations in the region, were provided during visits to the SANDF Army Engineer Formation and to the Institute for Military Engineering Excellence in Southern Africa (IMEESA). IMEESA is a non-Governmental, non-profit organization of retired military engineers. It is now developing a curriculum of courses to train deminers and program managers. The management courses are based on training which the SANDF provided to INAROE.



CASSPIR armored car equipped with various attachments for vegetation clearance

IMEESA could be a potentially valuable asset for expanding Humanitarian Demining training, assuming that funding for trainees can be found, and countries in the region are interested in sending students to South Africa for training. Despite the perception that South Africa emphasizes R&D and mechanical solutions, many South African representatives have observed that the value of technology per se is overstated, and that it is more important to create effective demining management structures in mine affected countries.

The U.S. delegation also met with ARMSCOR, the acquisition element of

the Ministry of Defence. ARMSCOR, with responsibilities covering all facets of defense technology, has a division, which is particularly interested in hand-held detectors (which they were careful to characterize as "metal detectors" rather than "mine detectors").

The team later visited the production facility of RSD, which manufactures the "Chubby" mobile mine detection and clearing system. The Chubby consists of a series of vehicles that detect, mark, and then detonate mines planted on roads. The lead vehicles are designed to dissipate the force of an explosion, should one occur, reducing risk to the driver. The wheel assembly, which absorbs most of the explosive force, can be easily replaced with a spare wheel assembly. This is towed at the rear of the system convoy. Heavier mine detonation trailers in the middle of the convoy are designed to set off the mines. In March 1998, President Clinton during a visit to South Africa announced that the U.S. Army would purchase several Chubby systems. While the U.S. acquired the Chubby to assess its applications for military countermine operations, there is also an appreciation of its value for humanitarian demining. The Chubby has in fact been used in Angola for humanitarian clearance.

The U.S. delegation spent a total of two days with Mechem, a contractor well-known for its development of mine-detecting dog procedures, high performance demining vehicles, and on-the-ground clearance operations. Mechem is currently engaged in clearing the area around the Massengir Dam in Mozambique, a project funded by the U.S. State Department and the Government of Japan.



Ground preparation

Various mine-proof vehicles, based on chassis of existing military models such as the Casspir armored personnel carrier, were demonstrated in simulated clearance operations. The Mechem philosophy is somewhat different from that behind the Chubby. Their emphasis is on using a greater number of fairly inexpensive vehicles, thus allowing routes to be marked much faster than would be the case with deminers on foot. Once mines are found, the assumption is that they would be cleared manually, rather than being detonated by being intentionally run over. With a variety of vegetation clearing blades, Mechem vehicles can also be used for a range of off-road clearing activities.

Joint Cooperation

In the course of this visit, several opportunities were identified for

reciprocal cooperation in the area of humanitarian demining. First, it was agreed to include demining as a formal BNC Defence Committee agenda item, so that progress in this area can be tracked and expanded in future meetings. South Africa was invited to participate in an international pilot project later this year, involving the U.S. and several European partners, to evaluate commercially available hand-held detectors. Information was provided to IMEESA on U.S. humanitarian demining training doctrine at Fort Leonard Wood, as a means of beginning an ongoing dialogue between training facilities. Finally, possible cooperative efforts between the USG and IMEESA were discussed, including the possibility of providing demining operations and management training courses to landmine-threatened countries.



Mine extraction

Challenges Ahead

Given the significant mine problem in the region, South Africa has a good deal to offer its neighbors in terms of training, equipment, and technical advice. Realizing this potential fully, however, will require overcoming two obstacles. First, neither the Defence nor Foreign Ministry are specifically funded to conduct humanitarian demining programs, and overall Government budgets are extremely constrained. As such, participation by regional states in South African training or other programs would likely require funding by a third party. Second, there is still a degree of reluctance exhibited by some countries in the region to engage with the SANDF, or organizations associated with it, due to the legacy of the apartheid regime. Because the creation of the SANDF resulted from the combination of former antagonists, some of the personnel, military units, and defense companies with the greatest potential to contribute to demining, have engaged in mine warfare for the old regime. In order for South Africa to convey its great demining support potential to its neighbor states, it will need to create teams who fully represent the "new" South Africa – and their activities will have to be diplomatically presented.

Given South Africa's enlightened and progressive efforts at demining thus far, they can clearly make a significant contribution to Humanitarian Demining. The U.S. trip was a useful first step in expanding cooperation in this area between the U.S. and South Africa, which hopefully will result in further combined efforts.