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The United Nations and Humanitarian Mine Action

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The United Nations and Humanitarian Mine Action

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Part I: An Integrated Approach to Mine Action

The international community has come to realize that only an integrated and holistic response to the issue of landmine contamination, and its multi-faceted humanitarian and socio-economic consequences, is capable of bringing real and lasting benefits to those who are to be considered at risk from these weapons. Indeed, such integrated mine action initiatives can not purely be limited to field based programmes in those countries where a humanitarian disaster has already occurred due to landmine contamination. The United Nations and other leading practitioners in the sector of mine action have long acknowledged that advocacy at the international level is also required of those who concern themselves with the plight of mine affected communities, most of whom are marginalised—even within their own societies—and lack any sort of collective voice.

The United Nations thus engages in the following activities, all of which it considers essential and mutually reinforcing components of international mine action initiatives.

International-Level Activities:

Consciousness-Raising

This includes straightforward information dissemination on the humanitarian consequences of landmine usage as well as advocacy designed to assist the process towards a global ban on anti-personnel landmines. Clearly, the two aims are intimately connected. Any in-depth study of the former leaves little doubt that only a complete ban on these weapons will effectively protect future generations.

Consciousness-raising can also be considered from the perspective of what might loosely be termed donor education. Not only is it important to continually highlight the human and societal consequences of landmine contamination, and hence the need for funding for mine-action, but it is also necessary to reinforce the differences between military, technical-engineering based concepts of mine eradication and the civilian, humanitarian-developmental nature and impact of properly funded integrated mine action programmes.

Field-Level Activities:

Mine Awareness and Mine-Risk Education

As long as minefields pose a direct threat to the lives, limbs, and prosperity of civilians in the post-conflict period, it will be essential to operate mine-awareness and mine-risk education programmes. The overall aim of such programmes is, through communication-based initiatives, to assist people to live more safely in a mine-contaminated environment. To be effective in the long run, such programmes need to help those living in mine-affected areas to see their conditions more objectively and to modify their behavior and attitudes accordingly. However, it is also becoming

increasingly clear that such programmes must be operated in a participative and respectful manner with regards to the mine-affected community. Often the community has unique understandings of the nature, scale, and impact of the mine problem in their area, and these understandings have to be harnessed to assist those implementing mine action programmes to structure their initiatives appropriately. Mine awareness and integral components such as using mine victims to gather data from other mine victims should thus be properly understood as a two-way flow of information and the primary interface for humanitarian mine action programmes with those they are trying to serve.

Mine & Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Clearance

Clearance is, of course, the central core technical element of mine action programmes and in many respects its most instantly recognizable, satisfying and tangible output. The process consists of three equally important phases: technical survey and verification; minefield marking; and eradication. Clearly, such activities can become sustainable only if local capacity is built up under international guidance during the early period of mine action programmes.

Training and skills transference are thus essential, not only in these technical-engineering skills but in the management and tasking of this technical capacity. This ensures that the humanitarian and developmental benefits of the clearance are maximized for the local community. Given current technological constraints, most mine clearance conducted today is still a manual process, involving deminers meticulously searching the ground with metal detectors and prodders. Inevitably, it is an extremely slow process. For this reason alone essential areas are the highest priorities, not only in the eyes of the local authorities and business interests but also of the mine affected communities themselves.

Effective training and skills transference is only possible by establishing mechanisms capable of involving the community in the direction of these technical resources. To achieve these ends, mine-action programmes can and are learning a great deal about participative-programme planning from community-development practitioners. This learning process is central to the maturation of international mine action programmes, a process that can only improve their effectiveness and sustainability.

Victim Assistance

Mine and UXO victims have very specific medical needs, differing significantly even from other war-trauma patients. As such, medical assistance is a highly specialized area, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has to some extent become the world leader in this regard, focusing on surgical and medical interventions. Just as in mine clearance, much effort has to go into training and creating a skilled local capacity to ensure sustainability. But the medical recovery of mine victims is only the starting point of a broader process of rehabilitation and reintegration within the community. Often mobility needs to be restored, commonly through the provision of prostheses. In rural agriculture-based economies, mine injuries often seriously impact the ability of the victim to earn a living, and skills training and related income-generation activities may also be required to make the reintegration process effective and dignified. Again, it has become increasingly clear to the international community that, to be effective, such initiatives need to be carefully integrated. Anecdotes exist about mine victims whose mobility has been restored thanks to the provision of a prosthesis but who, on returning to their (still mined) communities, are forced through economic pressures to return to the very same risk-taking activities that led them to have an accident in the first place. Inevitably, some of these individuals have had further mine accidents.

Part II: The Need for Coordination

It is quite clear the integrated mine action programmes call for an extremely wide range of technical and developmental interventions, quite beyond the competency of any one organization to implement directly. Thankfully, a wide range of international organizations, non-governmental

organizations, governments (both donors and recipients) as well as the private sector have come together to respond to the multiple challenges presented to the international community by anti-personnel landmine contamination. Key agencies and organisations include the following.

- **UN Entities:** Department of Peace Keeping Operations (DPKO), Department of Political Affairs, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme, and the World Bank.
- **Non-Governmental Organizations:** including Mines Advisory Group (MAG), Norwegian Peoples Aid (NPA), HALO Trust, Handicap International (HI), Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAFF), and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL).
- **Private companies:** including MECHEM, Mine-Tech, and Ronco.

Mine action needs to be tightly integrated, as their component parts are mutually reinforcing and need to dovetail smoothly. Clearly, there is a need for strong coordination of humanitarian mine-action programmes at the national level. Establishing and supporting what have become known as Mine Action Centres (MACs) in various mine-affected nations, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) has put in place structures capable of taking on this coordination role seriously and professionally. In every country where such MACs have been established, the medium-term aim is to hand these bodies over to the local authorities, who remain ultimately responsible for the coordination of such national mine action programmes. However, on the international stage it is also important that the principle of comparative advantage applies and that essential activities are undertaken only by those organizations with the corporate capacity and experience to meet the challenges. Furthermore, in a world of scarce humanitarian resources, it is clearly in the interests of mine-affected communities that funding is not needlessly wasted as a result of the duplication of functions and responsibilities.

In 1994 the Secretary General designated the DHA as the focal point within the United Nations system for mine-related activities, a move that was formally commended by the General Assembly during its forty-ninth session and reaffirmed at every consecutive session since. Amongst its various particular responsibilities in this regard, DHA's Mine Clearance Policy Unit was tasked to establish a comprehensive landmines database and to be the focal point of international information gathering and dissemination on the issue. The public face of the database is accessible on the Internet at <http://www.un.org/Depts/Landmine/>.

Part III: Coordination and Required Cooperation

Both at the national and international levels, DHA naturally lacks any formal means of enforcing its mandate with regard to the coordination of humanitarian mine action programmes. As such, it is entirely dependent on the good will and cooperation of its numerous established partners within the mine-action community. At the national field programme level, the need for coordination is readily acknowledged by nearly all partners, and DHA's coordination function has therefore been quite easy to implement. Equally, at the international level, there have been many positive instances of practical cooperation, both between DHA and its partners and amongst those partners themselves. One need only think of the recent successful regional initiatives of pro-ban nations and, amongst operational agencies, the work on the development of international standards for mine action, undertaken and promoted under DHA's auspices in 1996.

DHA is also particularly pleased with its excellent working relations with some of the leading agencies in the field, with whom it is actively sharing ideas on policy formation and the whole philosophy of mine action. Such partners, who are committed to strengthening the ability of the Mine Clearance Policy Unit to fulfill its demanding mandate, are much appreciated.

Recently, it has become clear that an increasing number of new organizations and agencies are engaging in mine-related activities, both in field and in other fora. Whilst acknowledging that this is a pleasing and much needed outcome of the on-going process of consciousness raising cited

above, DHA also feels that it is important to sound a cautionary note. New partners in the mine-action process would do well to effectively research the sector before starting projects, to ensure that they are not re-inventing the wheel or duplicating functions already being undertaken. By effectively policing themselves, such partners will find the humanitarian impact of their efforts to assist those living in mine affected communities maximized and as such will receive due credit from those who have already been working for some time in attempting to address what is, in effect, an international humanitarian crisis of grave proportions.
