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The Journal of Humanitarian Demining

From the Director's Desk

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HDIC

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Interview with the Chief Advisor for Operations and Technical Matters to the Cambodian Mine Action Center, LCOL Chip Bowness, Canadian Military Engineers.

[Director's Note: It is becoming increasingly evident that the functioning of a central coordinating facility is critical to the overall success of a humanitarian demining mission. These mine action centers (MAC) are now proving their worth in several countries. We felt it would be helpful if we highlighted the organization, function, and goals of selected MACs. We wish to point out however, that no one MAC design will be the answer to all mine action missions. Therefore, in this issue we decided to spotlight two very different, but very effective MACs to showcase effective methods, while at the same time illustrating differing approaches.

We believe that a careful evaluation of the interviews of the representatives of both the Cambodian Mine Action Center and the Croatia Mine Action Center can yield valuable lessons learned and suggest ways of increasing the effectiveness and cohesiveness of a nascent existing action program.]

Conducted October 1, 1997.

Q: To whom is the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) responsible and by whose authority does it operate?

A: The CMAC is responsible to the Royal Government of Cambodia.

Q: What are the goals of the CMAC?

A: To achieve a situation in Cambodia where people can freely go about their lives without facing the constant threat of landmines, and to establish a safe environment in which reconstruction and development activities can take place. This is the CMAC mission.

Q: Could you describe the vision you have for the CMAC?

A: We want to help build a sustainable demining program in Cambodia. To achieve the CMAC mission, this means that the Cambodians must continue to buy into the demining process and come to own it fully. It also means sustaining the interest of donors and other supporters, as well as developing a mindset committed to a long-term approach to the landmine problem...maybe a 20-year lookout. Additionally, we need to apply business principles to the demining challenge, weaving together the various parts of the program.

Q: Is all this really feasible?

A: Yes, if all involved assist in creating a "capacity building" mindset among the officials and people of Cambodia. That is, we must analyze and update our activities, as well as confirm our progress. We must also continue to ask ourselves, "What activities besides those already being done, can the Khmer managers do themselves?" and then slowly transition those activities to them.

Q: How are you funded?

A: By a variety of sources. Donor nations include Australia, Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Finland, Switzerland, the U.S., New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and others. The United Nations Development Program manages the funds and the major project to channel the funds to CMAC.

Q: How are you organized?

A: We have a staff of approximately 2,500 Khmer personnel, over 90% of whom are demining operators located in the field. There are also about 40 expatriate technical advisors, of whom 16 are military from five countries. Our headquarters is in Phnom Penh, while our new training center is in Kampong Chhnang. We have four regional demining units, which are equipped with technical advisors. The regional demining units are organized into a headquarters, from 15-18 demining platoons, mine marking teams, explosives ordnance disposal (EOD) teams, mine-awareness teams, as well as survey and marking teams.

Q: How do you decide in which geographic areas to concentrate your activities?

A: The national law on CMAC lays down the priorities for our demining activities; however, we basically adhere to the Royal Development Law. It provides the following guidelines for planning demining activities:

1. land earmarked for the resettlement of internally displaced persons,
2. land earmarked for agricultural use,
3. land earmarked for humanitarian community development, and
4. land earmarked for reconstruction in zones identified under the first three priorities.

We are currently dealing with the five provinces that exhibit the biggest threat.

Q: What is the Board of Governors?

A: It is a governing council composed of Ministers and Secretaries of State from ten different Ministries and provides guidance and counseling for prioritizing all activities that we undertake.

Q: I notice that in your reports you are beginning a five-year program. Can you adhere to that time frame or is the demining challenge too complex?

A: We concluded our first phase in 1996, and have solid funding and a coherent approach borne of lots of experience, so I think we are in good

shape to begin a long-range planning effort. The key at this time is a definitive Level One survey to determine the full extent of the mine and unexploded ordnance problem in the country.

Q: What data do you collect and from where do you obtain them?

A: We are primarily interested in geographic data pinpointing the locations of mines and unexploded ordnance. We find that word of mouth, human and animal casualty reports, and local information are the best leads. Consequently, we have established a minefield verification program. After receiving reports of minefield locations, we conduct a Level Two technical survey to confirm the reports.

Q: What do you do with that information?

A: We are developing a new project in Phnom Penh in which the many thousands of data points are integrated with our database of casualty and land-use priorities to give us a comprehensive look at each situation. Of course that data is used as the basis for prioritizing and planning new demining activities.

Q: What do you train?

A: We train mine clearing, EOD procedures, medical care, leadership, driver training, and management. We are also setting up a mine dog training center. Communication procedures are included in instructions and means of communications are provided to the operators and support staff.

Q: What are the greatest challenges to demining in Cambodia?

A: Because Cambodia has a six-month cycle of wet and dry seasons, the climate dictates our approach to demining. Our greatest problem, however, in addition to the mines, is the huge number and diversity of unexploded ordnance.

Q: Do you have a mine awareness program?

A: Yes. Since 1994, U.S. Special Operations Forces have assisted in developing a very good program, which will soon transition to a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) lead. Mines Advisory Group (MAG) also has quite active mine awareness programs.

Q: Are non-government organizations (NGOs) important to the demining efforts in Cambodia.

A: They are integral parts of the process. MAG, Halo Trust, and Conseil International de Development (CIDEV) are groups that are directly involved in mine clearance; however, many other groups contribute to the whole panoply of activities making up a demining campaign. Handicap International and Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) contribute technical advisors and are directly involved. These NGOs made an enormous difference.

Q: How do you control or coordinate the activities of the NGOs?

A: It is the role of the CMAC to coordinate all demining activities in Cambodia. We have developed a coordinating function in which NGOs can provide assistance, such as prosthetic devices and technical advice. We at the headquarters ensure that they are matched up with the appropriate regional demining units or that they cover a particular region.

Q: How successful has the CMAC been?

A: Ignoring all the geographical and ordnance figures, I like to gauge our progress by the fact that the number of landmine victims in Cambodia has decreased from approximately 300 to 125 per month since the CMAC was created. We have reduced the size of suspected mined areas by approximately 1,000 square kilometers; however, we still have about 2,500 square kilometers of terrain believed to contain mines. As of September of this year, we had cleared about 45 square kilometers of land. As you can see, we still have a long way to go, but we have already made a huge difference.

For additional information about the CMAC, visit its web site at <http://www.cmac.org.kh>, which should be operational after February 1, 1998. CMAC Public Relations can be reached via e-mail at jcbrown@forum.org.kh. For information concerning technical subjects, contact the CMAC via e-mail at cancon@forum.org.kh.
