

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 2

Issue 3 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 2

October 1998

The Future of Humanitarian Demining

Andy Smith

Humanitarian Mine Action Specialist

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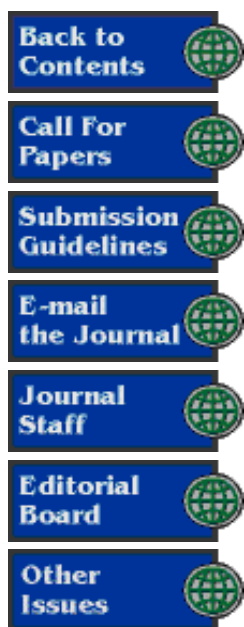
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Recommended Citation

Smith, Andy (1998) "The Future of Humanitarian Demining," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

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The Journal of Humanitarian Demining



The Future of Humanitarian Demining

Andy Smith

Issue 2.3 | October 1998 | Information in this issue may be out of date.
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At present, humanitarian^{*} demining in most affected areas begins with a United Nations(UN)-led emergency response, which is controlled by expats, who usually have a military background and who are largely paid for by "ear-marked" donations from UN countries. Those donations sometimes take the form of staff and goods. At the same time, as the UN arrives (and sometimes before), the specialist charitably-funded clearance groups, which are funded by an individual government's aid budget or by trusts and donor charities, tend to move into the area. The HALO Trust makes a point of, whenever possible, being in dangerous areas first. The Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) are widely represented around the world and probably have the highest profile of the other "charitable" clearance groups. Following the charitable groups come the commercial companies. Some of these companies are regionally based, as with MineTech and Mechem in Southern Africa. Other companies might appear to be regionally based, but they are actually initiated by profit-taking outsiders, as is increasingly the case in the former Yugoslavia (e.g., UXB International). A few organizations, such as the recently-suspended Afrovita in Mozambique, are locally based although they are sometimes run by outsiders. (It is reported that Afrovita has recently been suspended by the Mozambican National Demining Council for not delivering written statements of purpose for approval. However, this situation might be temporary.)

Exceptions to the above situation do exist in every affected region. The UN's Mines Action Centre Afghanistan (MACA) is the most striking exception. It funds a group of semi-autonomous commercial demining^{**} Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) from its base in Pakistan, and by doing so, it has pre-empted the slow move toward commercial demining that is found elsewhere.

While a few new charitably-funded demining groups do exist (such as MgM in Angola), most of the new players are commercial companies. Names such as Danex, Bac-Tec., ABC, ECC, and DeDeComp join the

familiar oldies such as Bombs Away, Gerbera, and RONCO. With the massive funding available for work in the former Yugoslavia, European groups from equipment suppliers to Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) companies are keen to get involved, and new allegiances and companies arise weekly. Elsewhere around the world, the process is slower, but it appears to be unstoppable. Both MineTech and Mechem are keen to operate outside Southern Africa, and MineTech has won contracts in Bosnia--breaking a tradition of one-way assistance by taking Africans to Europe in order to help solve the problem, but mostly, it is a one-way business.

One reason for the growth of commercial demining is that it can appear to be cheaper than the alternatives. Some remote funders might also believe it is more "professional." As far as cost advantages are concerned, a real cost comparison could only be made if you had identical areas cleared, number of devices found, land area opened up, operating conditions, terrain, vegetation, security constraints, speed, etc. In other words, meaningful cost comparisons are extremely hard to get. Examples at the extremes of expense and cheapness do exist (see later in this article), but as exceptions, they are not a reliable guide. As far as "professionalism" is concerned, the well-thought-of companies are usually staffed by men who have worked in the charitable sector, so the same level of professional ability pertains.

Another reason for people establishing commercial companies rather than charities is simply that it is generally much harder to establish a charity than a company. The paperwork and the search for initial funds can take far too long to get, and when finally granted, it can be hard to allocate money for continuity across funding gaps. So demining charities rarely arise, and when they do, they tend to be headed by people with intense personal commitment (such as the late Colin Mitchell, HALO; the McGraths, MAG; and Kruessen and Ehlers, MgM). Charities have to accept all manner of restrictions and require a peculiarly persistent determination to get going and keep going.

High cost is often attributed to UN-organized demining. This situation is not always down to the cost of the UN bureaucracy. For example, when a donor country sends UN military Technical Advisors (TAs) to support demining activities in an affected region, the typical cost of each TA place runs to US\$200,000 per year. Often, each TA does a six-month tour, half of which is spent learning the ropes when he arrives, and the other half is spent preparing to hand over the position to his successor when he leaves. The TA might have gained experience, but he is unlikely to have contributed a great deal to the mine-clearance effort. The cost of his input is, therefore, inordinately high.

The above example relates to one UN scenario. MACA in Afghanistan is a contrast. The few TA ex-pat staff involved there are long-term, and they run a unique system that makes their demining costs-per-square-meter among the lowest in the world. (They claim to be the lowest, but no realistic comparison exists.) The MACA system came about because of United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) deciding not to be based inside the country (its base is in Pakistan), and many other features of MACA are unique to the area, so it could not be easily duplicated in another region. However, MACA costs are low partly because all of the staff of the commercial demining companies it leads are local to the region and so are paid at "local" rates. The local management of demining companies happens in Southern Africa too. In this case, using a locally-managed and staffed company can appear to be supporting the provision of an indigenous demining capacity as well as saving money, so it can be attractive to donors looking for the best value. (Donor beware!)

While all commercial demining companies share the concern of making a profit, huge differences exist between their working ethos. Neither the size of the company nor its country of origin are reliable indicators of the company's approach or its ethics. Some of the early commercial players were European-based, as large as Royal Ordnance or as small as Rimfire, and they still acquired a bad reputation. Rimfire went to the wall, and Royal Ordnance continues. Many other commercial companies (with or without internationally experienced staff) have also behaved in a suspect manner, but they have avoided the spotlight.

Some commercial companies are run by people who have moved sideways from the charitably-funded or UN sector and have both experience of on-the-ground demining and high personal standards. Some other commercial companies are run by remote businessmen or by ex-military men who have little or no actual experience in demining. The latter are not necessarily people who will take self-regulation as seriously as self-interest.

At the top of a sliding scale of humanitarian credentials in commercial demining, I cite the examples of Greenfield Consultants and Specialist Gurkha Services (SGS). Greenfield works in Angola and Kurdish Iraq (at least). SGS works in Mozambique and Cambodia (at least). They are very different organizations, but they both have one important feature in common. When possible, both groups work with development NGOs: Greenfield works with CARE in Angola, and SGS works with Handicap

International in both Mozambique and in Cambodia. The safety records of Greenfield and SGS, incidentally, are reported to be excellent. Their senior staff are men with hands-on experience, and these men appear to have the commercial insight to see which way the wind is blowing.

At the other end of the scale are "cowboy" companies that have been established to make a fast buck from a "fashionable" donor area. These companies might lack concern for humanitarian issues, but that lack of concern does not necessarily make them bad at clearing ground. Between the end points of this sliding scale come varying levels of demining competence and indifference to humanitarian issues, and these levels can even vary within the lifetime of the same organization. During my field research, I have found some commercial demining companies that have laid mines to discredit other companies, laid obvious mines and ordnances in areas in order to get an easy clearance contract, left mines and ordnances that were clearly visible but were just outside of the area they were clearing, and for financial advantage, claimed that there were mines in a clear area. It all happens or has happened. The question is not how to punish the companies that have behaved in this way, but rather, the question is how to control the future behavior of these companies. One answer is found in the best examples--MACA, Greenfield, and the SGS.

MACA has TA staff on hand to make sure that standards are maintained and improved whenever possible. They are acting, effectively, as the humanitarian NGO partner to the commercial companies they support. Greenfield and SGS worked alongside humanitarian NGOs and thus have an external check to complement their own. And while the best companies might not require external regulation today, it is always conceivable that they would change hands or run into financial difficulties that changes their priorities; therefore, some kind of independent quality assurance should always be built into a contract with a commercial company.

A few new players have entered the charitable NGO field, and these organizations have demining as only one part of their expressed purpose. The Irish newcomer HMD is an example in Angola. (HMD has not yet started to work on clearing mines and rebuilding hospitals, so it is too early to judge how well the marriage of purposes will work.)

When a direct association with a humanitarian organization is not possible, it must be up to the funders to dictate the "humanitarian" part of commercial mine clearance. The funder should accept responsibility for

checking every stage, from survey to "declared safe," and checking that the standards are applied to deminer equipment and working conditions as well as ground clearance. In an ideal situation, the national government or a UN team of independent assessors can assume this role, but this situation cannot be seen as leaving the funders free from responsibility. The national government and the UN have made moves to control standards. For example, in Angola deminers must either be trained by INAROOE or be trained by an INAROOE-approved instructor. Just as with the Portuguese National Demining Center (CDN) in Mozambique, INAROOE must approve the statement of purpose of all demining groups. There are examples of organizations failing in both countries, so the test seems "real." Unfortunately, I hear that the same rigor is not applied to the INAROOE/United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) test of quality assessors in Angola, and some "failures" continue to work there (presumably as a result of conditions dictated by remote funders).

The approach of remote funders can often be questionable. Smaller funders might simply want to donate, feel good, and forget the situation. Larger donors might find all kinds of political considerations influencing their judgment. For example, when an organization like the European Union has decided to fund clearance in an area, there might be considerable loss of face and political advantage if they cannot do so. In those circumstances, local governments can impose all manner of unreasonable conditions and constraints (usually financial, but also on which organization actually does the work), and the funder might be pressed to accept those terms. This situation happened recently in Zimbabwe, where the contracts to both clear and QA the "Cordon Sanitaire" border minefield has been awarded very controversially. Obviously, funders should have the integrity to avoid political manipulation, but their inability to do so is probably the responsibility of their political masters rather than the individuals directly involved in the situation.

Around the world, a sub-industry of quality control specialists has arisen. Some companies place experienced men in the field with the teams they are assessing, but at least one company has been known to subcontract the work to a commercial clearance company that simply sends in its spare deminers. The assessors, therefore, must also be subject to regulation.

Below, I suggest five ways a funder could control the activities of commercial demining companies. Some of these suggestions will seem obvious. The reason I have included them is that they have all been overlooked in the recent past.

1. Surveys of minefields can currently consist of a few GPS readings and the report of a locally-available ex-soldier with regard to mine positions, types, and numbers. Local information is essential, but it should be confirmed by actually locating at least some of the reported items. As is the case in Bosnia, detailed mine-area surveys (sometimes called "Level 2," "Technical," etc.) should always be comprehensive. To allow this process to take place, someone must pay for the surveys. (Currently, someone does not always pay for these surveys.) The surveys could cover a suspect area in entirety and include UXOs, etc. If there are fewer than a set number (five?) pieces of ordnance or mines in the area, the survey team should destroy them. Survey costs could be based on those in Bosnia, which are not reported to be generous. Alternatively, the UN personnel in a country could undertake directing all detailed survey tasks. As it stands, where commercial companies thrive they can seek funding from donors directly, and those donors can insist that the survey is done for free before deciding whether to fund clearance (as with UNICEF in Mozambique during 1997).

2. Detailed survey reports should be put out to tender whenever commercial companies are to be employed. Each interested party should receive a copy (perhaps on payment of a charge).

3. Funders should appoint a wholly-independent demining assessor to carry out permanent documented quality-control assessment to ensure that working methods are approved and that the ground is surveyed and cleared to the level expected. That assessor should not be from the same country as those tendering, nor should he be from the country where the work is being performed. He should be suitably equipped so that he can be as "independent" as is possible while in the field.

4. Companies operating in Southern Africa learned that Mozambicans can be recruited for half the price of a Zimbabwean deminer, so experienced men are sometimes abandoned to save a few dollars. (The more expensive deminer only receives around US\$5 a day.) To remove the advantages of using cheap and inexperienced "new" staff, funders should dictate the level of deminer training, pay, and conditions and should carry out random checks on them.

5. Funders should guarantee that deminers are properly insured (to a pre-determined level appropriate for the region) and that suitable medevac procedures are in place. Basic protective equipment should also be available to deminers at all times, and the use of such equipment should be encouraged. The funder must accept that simply telling a commercial company to provide this equipment is not an assurance; it must be checked by the funder.

Assurances about the actions of commercial companies might be best achieved by their working alongside a non-commercial body that relies on the commercial company's work. It is not only that the one checks on the other--it is also that a sense of common purpose usually arises, and this sense of purpose keeps the commercial company on course. MAG set the lead in terms of trying to integrate demining with general development some years back. It was obvious to them that their work would be better targeted and achieve a greater impact if they worked in close collaboration with other agencies in the area. As a charity-funded NGO themselves, it was relatively easy for MAG to "marry" with other charitable organizations--although the clash of military and development backgrounds has not always led to an easy life. The same clash of military and development backgrounds has been overcome by Greenfield and SGS in their work with development NGOs, and this work proves that such a merging can be done if the desire to do so is present.

To review the points that were made, commercial demining is burgeoning. Some companies have set a high standard; others need to be regulated. A system of regulations could be imposed by the funder, the UN, or by linking the work of commercial demining companies with that of humanitarian NGOs. Examples of all three control systems exist as models although the current models of remote control by the funder are less than satisfactory. Demining donors--governments, trusts, or individuals--can be giving for many reasons. If it matters to the donor that the money is effective at getting ground cleared, the donor should look to the dynamic charitable or UN clearance groups or the commercial companies with established humanitarian credentials. The future I favor is the continued integration of demining with wider development aims and with a place for commercial demining in that union.

* "Humanitarian" demining is a loose description that seems to cover any ground-clearance not being done as a part of a military operation. I use the term more strictly. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "humanitarian" as "concerned with promoting human welfare" and the word "humane" as "benevolent, compassionate, and merciful."

**** I use "demining" to mean "ground clearance," which is the removing of all explosive materials from a defined area.**
