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Richard Kidd
United States Department of State

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Mine Free: Not Anytime Soon

by Richard Kidd [United States Department of State]

Mine action is changing. This is not 1997 and what the international community has learned in the past eight years clearly indicates that the path forward is something different from what a literal reading of the Ottawa Convention¹ would suggest. The Landmine Impact Survey process has demonstrated very clearly that only a small portion of the minefields—normally less than 20 percent—account for the vast majority of casualties and lost economic opportunities. The mine action community has a responsibility to profit from this new knowledge and to adjust its approach accordingly.

The phrase “mine free” is an inspiring statement of purpose but a poor organizing principle—given that no donor or collection of donors, no lending institution and no major impacted country has indicated a willingness to put up the huge amount of resources required to find and clear every last mine. With annual victim figures dropping towards 10,000, it is hard to make the case that landmines continue to be a global “scourge” compared to the impact of other issues such as HIV/AIDS, food security, malaria, etc. The initiative to “mainstream” mine action into development argues in favor of using “return on investment” as a criterion for mine clearance, and while this return is positive in many cases, it is not in all.

There is substantial evidence to suggest many of the mines now being cleared are inert, degraded by the effects of time, temperature and moisture. Why spend money to clear land that will not generate economic returns and why remove mines that Mother Nature has already rendered safe? Why risk deminers’ lives to clear land that no one will use? Attempting to clear every last mine would be, in a world of pressing demands and

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scarce resources, an unfortunate waste of funds, funds that could save more lives and be more beneficial if applied elsewhere.

This realization should not be taken as a critique of any treaty or policy position, but rather as positive testimony to the power knowledge can have in focusing limited assets on activities where such resources will do the most good. Mine-affected countries and the international community can work together to develop sound national strategic plans—ones that set forth achievable visions and match resources to prioritized, measurable outcomes. As the most pressing impacts of landmines are removed, collective efforts can shift away from large-scale clearance activities by outside organizations, allowing programs with greater national ownership to come to the forefront. These smaller, more balanced and sustainable programs would focus on mine risk education, marking suspected hazardous areas and limiting demining to only when newly discovered threats or changes in land-use patterns create the need.

Such an approach would allow for the most rapid reduction of hazards and the lowest possible expenditure, surely a desirable outcome from any perspective.

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See “References and Endnotes,” page 104



Richard Kidd is the director of the U.S. Department of State’s Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, overseeing the Department’s humanitarian mine action efforts in more than 30 countries, the destruction of small arms and light weapons across the globe, and efforts to destroy highly dangerous man-portable, anti-aircraft missiles. He is a 1986 graduate of West Point with a master’s degree in public and private management from Yale University. Before he joined WRA, he was employed by the United Nations and the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation.

Richard Kidd
Director
Office of Weapons Removal
and Abatement
U.S. Department of State
SA-3, Suite 6100 WRA
2121 Virginia Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20522 / USA
Tel: 1+ 202 663-0086
Fax: 1+ 202 663-0090, 663-0106
E-mail: kidd@pmwra.org
Web site: <http://www.state.gov/t/p/m/wra/>

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Endnote

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