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Hidden Killers in Afghanistan

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Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan

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ammonium but unfortunately spread almost 50 pounds of toxic material over the demolition area due to depleted uranium in the missile fragmentation warheads.

When properly trained and experienced personnel are utilized in munitions disposal operations, munitions unique hazards can be identified and separated for future disposition. During CEA operations in Iraq, contractors destroyed on average approximately 1 ton of assorted explosive ordnance with properly positioned detonator material and one block of C4 explosives (1.25 pounds).

Finally, another organization complicated the securing and disposal of ordnance by instructing local Iraqis on how to disassemble certain munitions to recover the valuable components, such as brass rotating elements. This was done to start a "cowage industry" in order to provide a source of income for unemployed Iraqis. The precious metal was then sold to scrap dealers.

Environmental Threats

The environment also poses hazards to those not familiar with the area. As would expect, the temperature in Iraq during the summer months can be extremely dangerous, particularly to personnel working outdoors dealing with explosives, propellants and metal objects. During July and August, average daily temperatures can range from 110 to 125 degrees Fahrenheit (43 to 52 degrees Celsius). Propellant becomes very unstable at these temperatures, metal-cased ordnance becomes extremely hot to handle without gloves, and in some instances, explosives in munitions begin to soften and ease. Large amounts of water were essential in CEA operations during the hotter part of the year, not only for hydration, but also in the event of a leakage of white phosphorous munitions.

Another environmental factor to contend with in Iraq is leishmaniasis, which is an infection in both humans and animals transmitted by sand flies (not fleas). Between August 2002 and February 2004, at least 522 cases of leishmaniasis were reported among U.S. military personnel who had served in southern Iraq. While treatment is available for this disease, it is far less painful and inconvenient to use N,N-diethyl-m-toluamide (DEET) lotion or permethrin repellent to avoid being bitten by a sand fly.

Other environmental factors to contend with in Iraq are snakes and scorpions. There are five types of poisonous snakes indigenous to the country, several of which have venom that is fatal to humans. Of relevance to CEA operations is the fact that both snakes and scorpions are fond of shading themselves in stacks of munitions both outdoors and in ammunition bunkers and warehouses. No fatalities have occurred as a result of encounters, but there have been instances in which workers have required medical assistance after a scorpion sting.

Logistics

Prior to the current conflict, the Iraqi infrastructure was well-established with an extremely complex road network. Many supplies were shipped in from Kuwait, as well as some from Jordan as the intensity of the insurgency increased. The danger of transporting supplies that were obviously destined for Coalition Forces or civilian contractors created a very tenuous supply system. Many Iraqi, Turkish and Pakistani truckers were killed, injured or scared away because they were aiding in the reconstruction of Iraq in the post-Saddam era. This situation has made supplying CEA operations a formidable challenge.

Much has been written and discussed about the amount of ammunition that has not been used in Iraq; however, little has been mentioned about the civilian CEA contractors who have accomplished a task never before attempted under fire. Their efforts have removed thousands of potential IEDs and weapons from the hands of the insurgents, protecting Coalition Forces and innocent Iraqis who simply want to live free from the oppressive Hussein regime.

In addition, by undertaking the CEA mission, the U.S. government has demonstrated its commitment in eliminating the hazards of explosive remnants of war. The United States will undoubtedly continue in this role as it moves forward in implementing the State Department’s new Weapons Removal and Abatement Program. These U.S. efforts will continue to properly dispose of explosive hazards and in the process protect innocent civilians, but also the global environment.

See “References and Endnotes,” page 104

If we look at the summary impact of the above achievements, MAPA has made a remarkable contribution toward the following:

• Increasing demining actions, which has improved health and quality of life
• Increasing repatriation process, which has reduced external aid required to support refugees and IDPs
• Reducing casualties and fatalities, which improves the safety and security of Afghan families
• Increasing access for emergency, rehabilitation and development projects through clearance of access roads and clearance of areas in preparation for subsequent assistance projects
• Increasing employment opportunities within the commercial sector through increased national productivity as well as for employers within mine action non-governmental organizations

Years of demining and mine action operations have reduced the number of casualties in Afghanistan, and lives are beginning to improve. Yet about eight percent of the estimated 33,000 communities in the country continue to be impacted and 12 percent of those are considered high-impact communities.

By Kahl M. Sharif (Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan)

Over 20 years of war have not only destroyed Afghanistan’s rural and urban infrastructure but also scattered landmines and unexploded ordnance throughout the country in urban and commercial areas, towns, roads, irrigation systems and canals, and farms and grazing land. These hidden killers are an obstacle to resettlement and economic sustainability for Afghanistan and its area offices in seven different geographical regions of the country, as well as to the following:

• Survey of over 377 square kilometres of high-impact mined area and 608 square kilometres of former battlefields
• Clearance of 315 square kilometres of high-impact mine-contaminated land and over 636 square kilometres of battle area clearances
• Delivery of mine risk education to almost 14.8 million people by direct or indirect measures

The Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan comprises the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan and its area offices in seven different geographical regions of the country, as well as

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implementing partners, both national and interna-
tional: U.N.; non-governmental and commercial
organisations have recorded over 8,700 people in
mine action operations in support of the government's
programme. Over the years, participating organis-
tions have recorded U.N. Mine Action Service: U.N.
Development Programme: UNICEF; U.N. Office
for Project Services; International Committee of the
Red Cross; Agency for Aid and Relief; Anwar
Relief Institute; Afghan Technical Consultants; British
Broadcasting Corporation–Afghan Education Project:
Danish Demining Group; Demining Agency for
Afghanistan; HALO Trust; Handicap International–
Belgium; INTERSOS; MECHEN; Mine Clearance
Planning Agency, Afghanistan Mine Detection
and Dog Centre; Monitoring, Evaluation and Training
Agency, Organisation for Mine Clearance and
Afghan Rehabilitation; and RNCO Consulting
Corporation. Assistance was also provided by Cranfield
University, Mine Action Information Centre and the Geneva
International Centre for Humanitarian Demining.
In 2002, Afghanistan entered a new phase in its
development during its transition to a more stable, in-
ternationally recognised state. Substantial economic
and social developmental resources from international
donors began coming into the country, while private-
sector activity increased at a rapid rate. As a result, de-
mand for land and the value of land increased substi-
tually. Many infrastructural and socio-economic projects were found to be in mine- and UXO-affected communities. Therefore, the tremendous increase in infrastructure projects challenged MAPA to both grow and adapt to new realities on the ground in Afghanistan. The mine action programme, in addition to the organisations providing technical assistance to the programme, has risen to this challenge.
The mine action programme has developed a new
strategy for mine action in Afghanistan. This strat-
ey accommodates Ottawa Convention timelines, in
addition to the country's urgent humanitarian and
economic needs. Paramount in the minds of most Afghans is a desire to reconstruct their country in an environ-
ment of peace and stability. This accelerated strategy is a cornerstone of the effort to promote a new Afghanistan, free of deadly remnants of war and the suffering and economic paralysis they cause. For the new Afghanistan to emerge, donor support for both humanitarian mine action and reconstruction mine clearance efforts will be necessary: reconstruction mine clearance must occur in conjunction with other programmes in order to see sub-
stantial development. See “References and Endnotes,” page 104

Northwest Cambodia’s
Mine/UXO Situation

Based on recently acquired data from selected areas in Battambang province in northwestern Cambo-
dia, the authors offer a preliminary report on what appear to be very significant shifts in the nature of the
mine/unexploded ordnance situation. The new data is used to make comparisons between the situation in
2000 and the current situation. Next, they offer evidence of how locally based initiatives appear to have
become the predominant driving force of mine action in the selected areas.

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Changes in Suspected Mined Areas, 2000–2005

The observations in this article are based on data from three areas in Battambang province: the com-
unites of Andaeuk Haeb and Kantueu Muoy and Kouk
Choeur village. In total, the three affected areas include
15 villages. All three communities are mine- and
UXO-affected communities located in interior parts of the
province. The National Level One Survey (NL1S) re-
ported in 2000 that there had been a total of 178 mine-
related injuries in 62 deaths since mines were first laid in these areas.

These locations were selected simply because they are the first areas for which new data has become available. The selection is not based on sampling techniques and therefore should not be used for extrapolation.

In 2000, the NL1S reported the 15 villages in these three communities had 38 suspected mined areas with
an estimated area of over 1,200 hectares (3 square miles). As more information became available, some of these suspected mined areas were shown to be of varied size. One new area was also discovered. The net result was a reduction in the suspected contaminated area by 27 percent to just over 900 hectares (3 square miles).

The current status of these 45 SMAs is shown in Figure 1.

Fifty-three percent of all SMAs in the three commu-
unities were completely cleared in the last five years. An additional 42 percent were partially cleared. Only two SMAs were not cleared at all in this period. Further examination of the clearance activity shows that partially cleared SMAs are mainly of larger size, and only critical areas within them have been cleared.

Before the NL1S in 2000 there had been considerable
activity as the focus of attention has shifted to other areas of the province. Figure 2 shows that CMAC
worked in only two SMAs and cleared 5 percent of the
total cleared area; the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces
worked in three SMAs and cleared 7 percent of the
total cleared area; and MAG worked in only one in a
cooperative effort with RCAF. The total cleared area by all three organisations has been about 50 hectares (124 acres). What is most surprising is that 86 percent of the SMAs that have been cleared or partially cleared have been worked on by community-based individuals or groups (see Figure 2). This represents an estimated 91 percent of the area cleared of mines/UXO in the three communities in the last five years.

Even more surprising to those of us involved with
providing assistance to Battambang MAPU is that, in total,
43 of the 45 SMAs in these three communities have ei-
ther been completely cleared or partially cleared between
2000 and 2005. An estimated total of almost 550 hectares (2 square miles) has been cleared of mines/UXO in the same period (see Figure 3).

One result of these findings is that the Battambang MAPU will try to compile a complete
inventory of the mine history of all SMAs in the province. It is likely, by some time in 2006, the
Battambang MAPU and others in northwestern Cambodia will have such data available to them. Assistance with this effort is being provided from the “Task Assessment and Planning—
Decision Support at MAPUs” project, funded by the Canadian International Development
Agency and working in collaboration with the Australian government’s Overseas Aid Program (AusAID)-funded project “Capacity Building for Mine Action Planning.”

http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol9/iss2/10

See “References and Endnotes,” page 104
A Regional Approach: Mine and UXO Risk Reduction in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Wells-Dang

Further Reading

8. UXO Laos: Annual Report 2004, UXO Laos, PO Box 545, Vientiane, Laos, PDR. Tel: (050-21) 41486; Fax: (050-21) 415766, E-mail: uxolao@landmines.com.

Endnotes


Endnotes

2. One square kilometre is approximately 0.386 square mile.

Observations on Recent Changes in North-west Cambodia’s Mine/UXO Situation, Simmonds, et al.

Endnotes

1. LIS is an abbreviation for Landmine Survey that is commonly used in Cambodia. This is not to be confused with LIS (Landmine Impact Survey), which is a community-based national survey that measures the extent of the impact of the landmine problem in a country, based on the number of recent victims, socio-economic blockages and type of munitions.

USAID’s Perspective: The Importance of Social and Economic Developing Strategies for Humanitarian Mine Action, Feinberg

Endnotes


Mine Action and Development, Turcotte

Endnotes

1. From the 2004 Nairobi Declaration by States Parties to the Ottawa Convention.

Integrated Mine Action: A Rights-Based Approach in Cambodia, Campbell

Endnotes


How Can Economists Contribute to Mine Action, Marsh

References