The War Goes On

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reported by contracted village demining teams. These procedures include handover certification by commune and district officials; quality assurance with metal detectors in the presence of these officials and other community representatives; and ploughing of the newly cleared land before handover.

During demining activities, both contracted village demining teams and the landowner described somewhat similar procedures. These procedures had been learned from employment in the armed forces and seemed to have been implemented in a disciplined manner. There have been no reported incidents during these demining activities.

The one accident reported seems to have occurred during what we would describe as sporadic, incremental and unplanned informal demining in contrast to the disciplined and carefully planned activities of the village demining team. It is in such situations that it is to be most expected that accidents are likely to occur.

Removal and destruction of mines/UXO discovered by community-based mine action initiatives is often arranged by “official” organizations. This arrangement promotes safety by reducing the risk of tampering with stored mines/UXO and during destruction.

Tools used to assist mine/UXO detection and removal are very similar to those used by the “official” organizations, and this is not surprising as these organizations are often the source of the rented equipment. A significant difference is in the use of body armour. None of those interviewed used special protection for any parts of their bodies—unlike all the employees of “official” organizations for whom the use of body armour is obligatory.

Why Informal Demining?

One village in the selected area provides an understanding of the impact of governments and communities on mine clearance. When internally displaced persons started to settle in this village in 1997, the representative of a local charity involved with providing development assistance to the village told us that the charity requested CMAC clear areas for a school and later for a clinic. They were unable to assist. Later the charity again asked CMAC for assistance with clearing agricultural land to support the IDPs. Again they were unable to assist. Waiting time is reported to be three years. Throughout this period, there had been a rapid increase in population, mainly through internal migration.

A village demining team was started when the district chief asked the charity to assist with a road project in this village. In 1997, the road was still mined and needed bridges and culverts as well as a road bed. The charity hired local men to do the demining, and this was the start of the demining team. Subsequent demining work has been authorized by the district office. We were shown a handwritten, signed and stamped authorization from the district and commune offices.

In this case, contracted demining clearly reflects community priorities. Battambang MAPU believes that these carefully designed, responsible arrangements are unique in the province.

Conclusion

Early results of data collected by the Battambang MAPU in 2005 concerning mine clearance are very encouraging. A large portion of the SSMs in the selected communities have been cleared of mines and are now safe and in productive use. Socio-economic impacts of mines/UXO in the areas have declined dramatically. “Official” mine action has been minimal in the 15 villages during the last five years. Most of these socio-economic improvements are believed to be attributable to informal community-based mine clearance initiatives. Over 500 hectares (2 square miles) have been cleared of mines/UXO in five years, more than 90 per cent by community-based mine action initiatives.

Injuries and deaths from mines/UXO accidents in the selected area have decreased from 14 to four during these two years. The number of facilitate death or injury denied access to agricultural land has decreased by 58 percent, despite an increasing population.

Safety issues related to the cleared land after demining and also during the demining process are nonexistent. There have been no reported mine-related accidents on land that has been cleared by community-based mine action initiatives. Only one accident has been reported during unplanned activities.

The sophistication of contracted group mine action is remarkable and the results are impressive. In one instance, a process for local community verification of clearance work has been developed. Although contracted mine clearance of this type may a unique situation in Cambodia, its success may stimulate similar initiatives that complement “official” demining.

This report is based on data collected in 2005 by the MAPU in Battambang and it compares this data with data collected by the NL1S in 2000. Currently, this data is only available for selected areas in Battambang, but the MAPU is attempting to prepare a comprehensive inventory. With this new data, it is possible for the first time to quantify the changes in mine-contaminated areas in Cambodia.

The analysis presented in this paper and our conclusions are the opinions of the authors and do not necessarily present the views of GeoSpatial International Inc., the government of Canada, or GeoSpatial International Inc., the government of Cambodia. GeoSpatial International Inc., based in Victoria, Canada, has worked on various contracts in Cambodia with the International Development Agency since 2000.

See “References and Endnotes,” page 104

By developing mine risk education and training materials specific to regions and countries, the Golden West Humanitarian Foundation tries to help prevent landmine casualties.

Yet deaths and injuries from human interactions with explosive remnants of war continue to occur for many reasons.

by Alan R. Vosburgh | Golden West Humanitarian Foundation

Mr. Le Phu, 48, was killed instantly and his daughter seriously injured in June 2005 when, according to Clear Path International and Vietnamese officials, an 81-millimeter 3-inch mortar exploded in Hau Giang commune of Vinh Long province in central Vietnam. Le Phu, an ice-cream vendor and part-time scrap collector, was at home removing the explosive charge from the mortar with a large knife when the detonation occurred. His 16-year-old daughter was injured by mortar fragments while cleaning vegetables nearby.

Many believe 30 years of humanitarian demining efforts have drastically reduced threats to Vietnamese civilians from explosive remnants of war like the mortar projectile that killed Le Phu. The reality is that in many places in Southeast Asia, ERW casualties seem to be growing instead of decreasing due to population pressure, modernization and globalization.

Since the end of the American war in 1975 and cessation of hostilities with China in 1979, a number of organizations have worked hard to reduce the threats of unexploded ordnance and landmines in Vietnam. In April 1975, the Vietnamese military conducted a concerted clearance effort to allow internally displaced people access to formerly contested areas. The Vietnamese demining organization, other military units, and a number of non-governmental and international organizations have been busy, especially in the central region of Vietnam.

Despite all these efforts, deaths and injuries from human interactions with ERW continue to occur. Vietnam is known as one of the most contaminated nations in the world, with explosive residue from wars with France, America and China littering the land. At the same time, Vietnam is a growing, vibrant nation with an expanding economy and a determination to modernize the infrastructure.

Some of this infrastructure development is a proximate cause of increasing ERW victims. For example, there are several highway projects now allowing passage through previously inaccessible or underdeveloped areas along the Vietnamese-Laotian and Vietnamese-Cambodian borders. The Ho Chi Minh National Highway follows the general tracé of the old wartime “Ho Chi Minh Trail” network. While most of the wartime trail was inside Laos or Cambodia, many branches led to remote areas of Vietnam. Consequently, these were some of the most intensively bombed areas in the world during the 10 years of war with America. Another highway project, the Trans-Asia Highway, will eventually join Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand to other parts of Asia. This highway will pass through some of the most contested areas of the Indochina wars. With this increase in infrastructure, people are exposing thousands of construction workers to serious threats from unexploded ordnance.
plowed aerial bombs and submunitions in their path. Use of large earth-moving machines, able to dig deep in the ground, can only compound the dangers from deeply buried—but still deadly—munitions.

Risk management can help workers avoid disaster, but the immediate dangers pale now to the potential for long-term threats to the population. Highways are magnets for the region's impoverished population. As highways are completed, people gravitate to them to service the needs of travelers for food, fuel, lodging and goods. New towns and villages, where only jungle has been for millennia. Jungles still hold a variety of hazards, including poisonous snakes and deadly diseases such as malaria and Japanese encephalitis, as well as tons of unexploded munitions.

Poverty and global markets for scrap metal are major contributors to the problem but are not the only sources of ERW victims. Small submunitions, locally known as “bomhics,” often appear rusted and too old to pose a danger, but the fuses in the center are well-protected and may only require a slight shock or jar to set them off.

Children, even those who have received some sort of mine risk education, are often hurt or killed playing with these submunitions. Farmers find UXO while clearing land for agriculture, sometimes having buried munitions with tools or plows, and the results are deadly. These farmers often don't know how to report the problem or obtain trained explosive disposal support, so they attempt to remove the items themselves. In other cases, they want to exploit the scrap for illegal mining or for the metal to sell as scrap.

Scrap collection is a growing problem because the price metal dealers will pay continues to rise. Much of this scrap consists of UXO, an industrial and military byproduct. It is now illegal to possess or use improvised explosive devices, but other indicators of ERW dangers. These indicators may be as obvious as obscured or damaged minefield signs or improved local warning signals (painted rocks or sticks, etc.), or less obvious ones such as military vehicles destroyed by mines. Overgrown roads, trails or agricultural land may show that there are mines or other dangers keeping people away. Old trench lines, collapsed defensive positions and rusted barbed wire indicate a former military position. Patterns of large craters may demonstrate an old bombing strike and the potential for UXO.

The Golden West Humanitarian Foundation has responded in situations similar to Vietnam by developing a Landmine Indicators Program to assist mine risk education efforts. This program educates local people on UXO hazards by producing educational materials using local language terms and photos of mines and UXO in realistic local settings. People at the village level learn to recognize not simply mines and UXO, but other indicators of ERW dangers.

During the war, some Vietnamese specialized in salvaging explosives from UXO to use in constructing booby traps or other improvised explosive devices. It is now illegal to possess UXO in Vietnam, but a market remains, and some of the old skills survive. Unfortunately, many of those who seek to remove the explosives—whether to make the metal projectiles safe to sell for scrap or to re-cover explosives for other uses—do not have the requisite experience. Many others simply cannot distinguish the dangerous items from common scrap.

This situation is unique to Vietnam, but exists in many nations in Southeast Asia and around the world. One of the challenges has been access to quality, accurate, educational materials with technical information oriented to the specific hazards encountered by specific countries. Within Vietnam, several organizations, most notably the United States Department of State, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, PeaceTrees Vietnam, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and several others, have worked hard, assisting the Vietnamese with training and equipment to clear mines and UXO, conducting studies and surveys to help identify the extent of the problem, and providing education on ERW risks.

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The Golden West Humanitarian Foundation, a U.S. 501(c)(3) nonprofit, was created in 1998 to help support organizations, charities and other non-governmental organizations involved in landmine clearance and explosive ordnance disposal operations. There are many organizations that have a great desire to eliminate mines and other ERW, but often they don't have the required technical knowledge. The Golden West founders recognized this fact and organized an international network of military and civilian ordnance experts, chemists, trainers and technicians all sharing the same objective: find the ways and means to improve support to the field. The Golden West Landmine/ERW Indicators Program has been applied with great success in Azerbaijan, Mozambique, Angola and most recently in Cambodia. There, Golden West produced over 13,000 copies of ERW media for the Cambodian Mine Action Center, funded by the U.S. Department of State.

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Another benefit of the Golden West approach is the Indicators Program produces materials that can be used to train local explosive ordnance disposal operators. In many places, shortages of technical materials and training aid governments to EOD make training difficult. Not only do the photos and drawings aid identification of munitions and other technical information provided is useful in day-to-day operations. The newest Cambodian ERW package is designed to assist the expansion of CMAC EOD teams into the eastern provinces of Cambodia.

Finally, the innovative Golden West reporting system makes it simple for people to notify authorities when a dangerous item is found. The shapes of dangerous munitions are depicted with numbers and letters allowing easy reference for accurate reporting. More accurate reports make the EOD response process faster and safer.

Golden West recognizes the potential for thousands of new ERW victims in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and is doing something about it. Applying Golden West technical and operational expertise via strategic partnerships with other national and non-governmental mine and UXO action organizations is not a total solution but rather a good start. As an example, the Cambodian government has agreed to develop a new system that has the potential to be an increase in human interaction with ERW in Southeast Asia.

See “References and Interface,” page 105

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Information Booklet
Cambodia Specific Version

The popular Golden West ERW indicators booklets for western Cambodia.
Minne: Not Anytime Soon, Kidd [from page 4]

Endnotes


An Operator’s Perspective on Ottawa’s Article 5, Nergaard [from page 35]


The War Goes On, Yosubarg [from page 27]


How Can Economists Contribute to Mine Action, Marsh [from page 51]