Mine Action and Development

The author explains why he thinks the international mine action and broader development communities are moving in the right direction by mainstreaming mine action into development programs where the degree of landmine contamination warrants.

by Earl Turcotte | Foreign Affairs Canada

L andmines are victim-triggered weapons that in-jure or kill on contact. They are indiscriminate by nature, making no distinction among enemy combatants, farmers at work, or children at play. Nor do they cease to be a threat when a conflict has ended. The vast majority of mine incidents involve civilians who are killed or injured post-conflict, often many decades after the formal cessation of hostilities.

It is speculated that since 1975, there have been more than a million landmine casualties worldwide. While the number of incidents continues to drop as countries accede to the Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel mines—146 at the time of this writing—are still below 15,000 and 20,000 direct casualties each year. There is also increasing evidence that many more—possibly many times more—suffer and die as a result of the indirect, but equally lethal, impact of landmines as an obstacle to sustainable development.

In addition to threatening life and limb, landmines inhibit rehabilitation and reconstruction, agriculture, water supply, education, and industrial and commercial development. They prevent the safe return of refugees and displaced persons, and inhibit rehabilitation and reconstruction, agriculture, education and the means to provide for ourselves and our loved ones over the long term. We are all “developing,” albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

Positive Changes

It is a tragic fact that in the heat of battle and the fog of war even the most responsible and disciplined areas of diplomacy, defence and development. This is an ambitious undertaking but one that promises to generate real synergy and hard results overall.

The following also underlines the soothing effect of the distinction between the so-called “developed” and “developing” worlds. We are all “developing,” albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

“A child who dies of diarrhoeal disease because the only clean water source in an area is mined or of malnutrition because farmers’ fields are mine-contaminated is no less a mine victim than the child struck down directly by a landmine.”

Development: Much More Than a Healthy GDP

The integration of mine action in the broader developmental agenda reflects further evolution in our understanding of “development” and what it takes for it to be achieved. Among the many lessons that almost half a century of international development cooperation has taught is that “development” is an increasingly inclusive notion—much more than a healthy gross domestic product—and “human-centered development” requires a multi-dimensional and comprehensive approach. It is not enough that people have nutritious food, potable wa-ter and shelter from the elements. We also need a clean environment, adequate health care, education and the means to provide for ourselves and our loved ones over the long term. We need to live in societies where rule of law prevails, where civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights are respected, where we are free to move about in safety, and so on. To fully develop, therefore, we must create the conditions under which a very wide range of physical, psychological and other needs can be met on an ongoing basis.

If one embraces this broad concept of development, immediately obvious is the relative artificiality of any categorical divide between traditional “peace and security” and “development” concerns. At minimum, we are compelled to acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between the two, as one is almost invariably a necessary condition for the other. Perhaps more appropriately, we should regard them as largely one and the same and structure our interventions accordingly. To this end, several countries have begun to take what is now commonly called the “3-D” approach on many international files by forging strategic al-liances and, in some cases, full partnerships at the national and international levels in the pursuit of common goals.

But by no means is this the only area of prog-ress. Some of the same states and others, through the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, have established protocols that ban the use of weapons and incendiary weapons, among others. At the same time, they are actively engaged in the search for instruments and measures to address adequately the often-horrific impact on civilian populations of anti-vehicle mines, cluster munitions and the like.

Yet other fora are grappling with special challenges presented by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (at roughly 639 million and counting) and other conventional weapons and, most terrifying of all, weapons of mass destruction.

Conclusion

The face of war is changing. More often than not, combatants are indistinguishable from and intermingled with civilian populations. Even when they are not, today’s battlefield is tomorrow’s village, roadway or farmer’s field. Fighting such wars in a manner that re-spects this reality requires weapons that:

1. Render appropriate force
2. Are reliable
3. Can be carefully targeted to minimize risk to civilians

It also requires the unwavering determination of those who have these weapons to use them responsibly.

References and Endnotes, page 105

Earl Turcotte was recently appointed director of the Mine Action and Small Arms Team in the International Security Branch of Foreign Affairs Canada. From May 2004 to June 2005 he was senior development advisor to the UNDP Mine Action Team, based in New York. From 1992 to 2004, he was with the Canadian International Development Agency in various capacities, and he was an occasional television broadcaster focused on international issues.

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“Penguins Mate in Minefields”

It might not be your typical drive-in movie theater, but these days the hip place to mate happens to also be one of the most dangerous. Yet, thousands of penguins have found sexual sanctuary in several minefields on the Falkland Islands. Luckily, the penguins are far too light to detonate mines, so they have a natural security blanket surrounding them. The mines keep man and other predators away. Nearly 25,000 landmines were laid in the Falklands by Argentine forces in 1982 during their un-declared war with the UK. Penguins frolic in wild abandon while the British government continues to negotiate. More often than not, combatants are indistinguishable from and intermingled with civilian populations. Even when they are not, today’s battlefield is tomorrow’s village, roadway or farmer’s field. Fighting such wars in a manner that respects this reality requires weapons that:

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News Brief

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The author explains why he thinks the international mine action and broader development communities are moving in the right direction by mainstreaming mine action into development programs where the degree of landmine contamination warrants.

Landmines are victim-triggered weapons that in-jure or kill on contact. They are indiscriminate by nature, making no distinction among enemy combatants, farmers at work, or children at play. Nor do they cease to be a threat when a conflict has ended. The vast majority of mine incidents involve civilians who are killed or injured post-conflict, often many decades after the formal cessation of hostilities.

It is speculated that since 1975, there have been more than a million landmine casualties worldwide. While the number of incidents continues to drop as countries accede to the Ottawa Convention banning anti-personnel mines—146 at the time of this writing—there are still between 15,000 and 20,000 direct casualties each year. There is also increasing evidence that many more—possibly many times more—suffer and die as a result of the indirect, but equally lethal, impact of landmines as an obstacle to sustainable development.

In addition to threatening life and limb, landmines inhibit rehabilitation and reconstruction, agriculture, water supply, education, and industrial and commercial development. They prevent the safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and impose significant and unnecessary costs on health systems already stretched to or beyond capacity. They impose instability and insecurity and terrorize entire populations. For these and a host of other reasons, mine action is very much a development issue, and there is no doubt that in many affected countries, effective mine action can contribute a great deal to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

With increased awareness of the links between mine action and the achievement of the MDGs, mine-affected developing states have increasingly come to recognize mine action as a development priority as well as a humanitarian, security and human rights priority, and are giving it due prominence in their national development plans, strategies and budgets. When domestic resources are inadequate, some have put it forward as a critically important area of activity to consider for support by the international community. In response, numerous bilateral, multilateral and civil-society development agencies have begun to integrate or “mainstream” mine action into their regular programs—both as a sector of development unto itself, and as a means to advance work in more traditional sectors. Notably, in 2004, the World Bank identified mine action as a development imperative.

Development: Much More Than a Healthy GDP

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If one embraces this broad concept of development, immediately obvious is the relative artificiality of any categorical divide between traditional “peace and security” and “development” concerns. At minimum, we are compelled to acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between the two, as one is almost invariably a necessary condition for the other. Perhaps more appropriately, we should regard them as largely one and the same and structure our interventions accordingly. To do so, several countries have begun to take what is now commonly called the “3-D” approach on many international files by forging strategic alliances and, in some cases, full partnerships at the national and international levels in the areas of diplomacy, defense and development. This is an ambitious undertaking but one that promises to generate real synergy and hard results over time. The thinking also underscores the false distinction between the so-called “developed” and “developing” worlds. We are all “developing,” albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

Positive Changes

It is a tragic fact that in the heat of battle and the fog of war even the most responsible and disciplined of the world’s militaries, intentionally or unintentionally, have used weapons of a type and in a manner that do not always comply with international humanitarian law. It is incumbent upon the international community, there-fore, to address the most egregious weapons—weapons that by design and/or the way they are commonly used are prone to indiscriminate effects and cause high collateral damage.

By any standard, the Ottawa Convention is a re-markable achievement in the annals of international disarmament, demining and development coop-eration. It constitutes concrete action and makes manifest several of the core principles governing the conduct of war put forward so magnificently in the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols.

A child who dies of diarrhoeal disease because the only clean water source in an area is mined or of malnutrition because farmers’ fields are mine-contaminated is no less a mine victim than the child struck down directly by a landmine.

But by no means is this the only area of prog-ress. Some of the same states and others, through the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, have established protocols that ban land-b-lasting weapons and incendiary weapons, among others. At the same time, these states are actively engaged in the search for instruments and measures to address adequately the often-horrific impact on civilian populations of anti-vehicle mines, cluster munitions and the like.

Yet other fora are grappling with special challenges presented by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (at roughly 639 million and counting) and other conventional weapons and, most terrifying of all, weapons of mass destruction.

Conclusion

The face of war is chang-ing. More often than not, combatants are indistinguishable from and intermin-ging with civilian populations. Even when they are not, today’s battlefield is tomorrow’s village, roadway or farmer’s field. Fighting such wars in a manner that res-pects this reality requires weapons that: 1. Render appropriate force. 2. Are reliable. 3. Can be carefully targeted to minimize the risk to civilians.

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Tom Coates was an occasional television broadcaster focused on humanitarian issues. He left Cambodia one of the countries most heavily impacted by small arms and landmines.

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Assisting Landmine Accident Survivors in the Thai-Burma Border Region, Matthee [from page 11]

Endnotes

2. While only governments can sign the convention, non-state actors can sign the Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action through an organization called Geneva Call. Geneva Call engages NGOs to respect and adhere to humanitaric norms, similar to the anti-personnel mine ban. For more information, see http://www.genevacall.org/who.htm. Accessed Nov. 2, 2005.

3. Simple plumb methods use a plumb line, which is a reference line guided by a string or weighted at the end with a large weight known as a plumb bob. It is used to create a reference line for creating vertical lines.

A Regional Approach: Mine and UXO Risk Reduction in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Wells-Dang [from page 14]

Further Reading


8. UXO Lao. Annual Report 2004. UXO Lao, P.O. Box 345, Vientiane, Laos, P.D.R. Tel: (856-21) 41400; Fax: (856-21) 415766. Email: parcels@landmines.org.

Destroying the Mother of All Arsenals, Zachaczewski [from page 18]

Endnotes


Hidden Killers in Afghanistan, Sharif [from page 20]

Endnotes

2. One square kilometre is approximately 0.386 square mile.


Observations on Recent Changes in Northwest Cambodia’s Mine/UXO Situation, Simmonds, et al. [from page 24]

Endnotes
1. LIS is an abbreviation for Level One Survey that is commonly used in Cambodia. This is not to be confused with LIS (Landmine Impact Survey), which is in common use in other parts of the world.