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Learning Takes Many Forms During Mine Action Managers' Course

by Nicole Krieger Nitzay [Mine Action Information Center]

In the summer of 2005, 19 senior-level managers from mine action programs worldwide descended on James Madison University in the heart of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley to develop and improve their toolbox of management skills at a course sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme. Five weeks later, they left with a wealth of new knowledge, new friends and fond memories of their experience.

At first glance, it looks like your average classroom at any American university. A professor is at the front of the room, loading a PowerPoint presentation for viewing on a projector screen. A few notes are scumbled on the blackboard visible on either side of the screen. Several tables occupy the center of the room, with 20 or so empty chairs awaiting their occupants, who are in the hallway for a short break between sessions. But once the room begins to fill again, it is quickly apparent these are not your average college students.

The first tip-off is the sounds that fill the room. Several languages are intertwining all at once—English, Arabic, French, Portuguese—giving a vibrant air to the classroom. And the sight of this diverse crowd makes it more apparent that this class is unique. They represent 15 countries from all over the world—Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans—and for most of them this is the first time in years they've been in a classroom as well as their first time in the United States.

Yet for five weeks during the summer of 2005, these 19 managers of mine action programs left their homes and families to hit the books again, attending the Mine Action Senior Managers Course—given by James Madison University's Mine Action Information Center and sponsored by UNDP—to hone their management skills. They studied everything from identifying organizational strengths and weaknesses to budget oversight and risk-management techniques, learning from JMU faculty members whose expertise includes economics, international law, media relations and ethics. Guest lecturers also taught modules on mine action-related topics such as data management, U.S. government assistance, mine surveys and international standards. UNDP representatives Sayed Aqa and Mohammad Younis facilitated the participation of the students and greeted them personally at the opening and closing of the course.

Valuable Lessons Learned

Participants in the managers' course agreed that they learned valuable information during the course that they will put to use at home. Col. Antoine Nimbecha, assistant chief of operation of the Mine Action Coordination Centre in Onu, Burundi, said that before he came here, he didn't possess many solid skills for management. "Previously, I worked based on logical skills, not scientific ones," but while here, he "gained scientific skills to justify many solid skills for management. "Previously, I worked based on logical skills, not scientific ones," but while here, he "gained scientific skills to justify Many solid skills for management. "Previously, I worked based on logical skills, not scientific ones," but while here, he "gained scientific skills to justify

"Most subjects I already had some basic knowledge in. This course shaped what I already had in mind," said Dr. Adriano Francisco Goncalves, mine victim assistance coordinator for the National Inter-Sectoral Commission for Demining and Humanitarian Assistance in Angola. He found the strategic planning exercise that was the culmination of the course to be "one of the most important" aspects. Additionally, he benefited from learning about "project management and all the steps involved." They stay wasn't all classes and homework, though. The course participants also took field trips during their stay to see local sights, including a day trip to Washington, D.C., and a demonstration at Fort A.P. Hill in Virginia, at which they saw numerous state-of-the-art demining machines and tools in action. Many of the participants were impressed by what they saw there and considered it one of the highlights of their stay. Nimbecha said, "The demo visit was very useful as it is directly related to our work." (See Page 73 for more information on the demonstration trip.)

Javed Habib-ul-Haq, area manager of the Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan in Kabul, agreed. "I am glad I did not miss out on the opportunity to come here, he confided during the A.P. Hill trip. "My main focus for the past five years has been mechanical demining. In fact, there is one machine I have seen here that I will definitely buy back home."

Some benefited learning experiences didn't occur in lectures or on field trips, but rather during the participants' down time. They learn from each other daily about the different cultures and experiences of those around them. One of the most important things Nimbecha took away from this experience was a sense of camaraderie and togetherness. 'I changed from an 'I' thinking to 'we.' Mine action is a question of all together. "I changed from an 'I' thinking to 'we.' Mine action is a question of all

Participants and staff from the summer 2005 session of the UNDP-sponsored Senior Managers Course. The course was implemented by the Mine Action Information Center at James Madison University.

Culture Shock

Spending five weeks in a foreign country can be a big adjustment, especially if it is your first time in that country, as it was for many of the course participants. Even everyday tasks like communicating with others and eating can turn out to be more difficult than they may seem.

Being from such different backgrounds, the students' levels of proficiency in English varied, and the language barrier was difficult for most at some point. Although he seemed very comfortable speaking in English, Nimbecha confessed he sometimes had trouble. "It may [have been] better to have some more English skills beforehand," he said. In particular, Nimbecha sometimes found it difficult to understand the professors, especially those with an accent. He did feel that his skills improved while here, though, and Goncalves agreed that although he was a bit out of practice with his English, "at the end you start to go quicker, things come to you faster." To accommodate those who needed some assistance with English, professors made an effort to slow their speech and articulate their words more clearly. Also, the MAIC provided a weekly English class in the evenings for interested students.

Food was an even bigger issue than language for many of the visitors. Their taste buds weren't accustomed to the taste of American food, and some even marveled at foods they don't have in their countries. Still, most found something from the variety of foods in the campus dining hall that suited their taste. It was a bit more difficult, though, for those with specific dietary needs, such as those participants who are Muslim. "It was hard being a Muslim to find halal meat," Habib-ul-Haq explains. Eating fish was one option, but the selection in the dining facilities does not usually include fish. Javed and some of the other participants found a way around this, though, by befriending the dining service staff. "One of the servers in the dining hall would save some fish just for those people so we could have some meat," he said. MAIC staff also provided transportation to the Halal Food Market in Harrisonburg for Muslim participants.

One of the participants' favorite pastimes during their stay was shopping. Often the prices in America were much cheaper than they could find at home, and they took advantage of this as often as possible, frequenting the local Wal-mart and shopping mall. Participants were impressed by how "you can find everything." Some, however, were expecting more to meet their shopping needs. "I expected to have more choice of stores. Wal-Mart is good—they have everything you need—but more variety would be nice," said Goncalves.

Personal Connections Erase Stereotypes

At home they are military officials, politicians and high-ranking government workers, but here they were students, and while they held positions of considerable power and importance, they were incredibly gracious and humble, especially when speaking of their hosts. "I want to thank all the JMU/MAIC staff greatly for everything they've done," said Goncalves. "The MAIC staff was very supportive," agreed Habib-ul-Haq.

Some participants admitted, though, that they'd originally had some reservations coming to America, partially because of pervasive stereotypes about Americans. Director of the Cambodian Mine Action Authority's Regulation and
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From the Field:

Jennifer Schraw, a student employee of the MAIC, shared an experience she had that had a profound impact on her. The Muslim participants invited her to attend one of the prayer services at the mosque they went to once a week during the course. “I was surprised at how closely the message resembled what I grew up hearing in a Methodist church. It was amazing to experience another culture, yet find so many similarities,” she explained. “Throughout the entire course I was pleasantly surprised by the participants’ basic morals and desires, and how they reflected mine.”

Taking Learning to the Field:

Taking Learning to the Field: Demining Equipment Demonstration

by Sarah Sensamaust [Mine Action Information Center]

The Rotary Mine Comb.

A s part of the Senior Managers Course conducted by the Mine Action Information Center during the summer of 2005, representatives from international mine action organizations had the opportunity to see the latest demining equipment demonstrations at Virginia’s Fort A.P. Hill. Watching from the bleders in the mid-summer heat, the participants saw demonstrations highlighting dozens of instruments for detecting and neutralizing landmines andUXMs. With a distinct signal depending on the item located, the deminer is able to increase effectiveness and speed by not stopping for clutter resulting from personnel mines. With a flail head that quickly clears vegetation and tripwires, the Tantras can be used to clear vegetation in hard-to-reach areas, making it useful in developing countries where roads are often less accessible. Reaching out from the vehicle is a 4.5-meter-long (15 feet) arm with a flail head that quickly clears vegetation. The Tantra removes vegetation in hard-to-reach areas, making it useful in developing countries where roads are often less accessible.
Humanitarian Deming as a Precursor to Economic Development, Lundberg [from page 53]  

The Road to Mine Action and Development: The Life-Cycle Perspective of Mine Action, Paterson and Filipino [from page 55]  
1. This phrase is from The World Bank, which has been in the forefront of planning, managing and financing post-conflict reconstruction since the wars arising from the break-up of Yugoslavia. The central role played by The World Bank is in the defining features of post-war reconstruction efforts, and during each period the Bank may be an important source of financing for demining.
2. Rogge master thesis will receive a strong similarity to Figure 1 in this article from Issue 5-6 (Chip Broomes, "The Mining Link in Strategic Planning. AlABA and the Endstate Strategy Concept for National Mine Action Planning", which was developed independently in 1998 by Chip Broomes to illustrate the "Endstate Strategy" approach to developing a national mine action strategy for Cambodia. GICHD personnel developed the life-cycle perspective to illustrate not only that the size of a programme would eventually diminish, but also that the principal purposes of and partnerships for a mine action programme will evolve in a manner that can be understood and planned for.
3. Row data does not help decision-makers unless it is "analyzed" into information. Information is the right data presented in the right format at the right time to the right people.

Mine Action and the Millennium Development Goals, Van Der Linden [from page 58]  

Environmental Applications in Demining, McLean [from page 60]  
4. Editor's Note: Some countries and mine action organizations are urging the use of the term "mine free," while others are operating the term "mine safe" or "impact free." "Mine free" connotes a condition where all landmines have been cleared, whereas the terms "mine safe" and "impact free" refer to the condition in which landmines no longer pose a credible threat to a community or country.

Neitzey: Learning Takes Many Forms During Mine Action Managers' Course [from page 69]  

Suriname Demining Mission, Ruan [from page 75]  
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That Landmine Thing: Students Take On the Landmine Crisis, Hudson and Fuentes [from page 77]  

From Interventions to Integration: Mine Risk Education and Community Liaison, Durham [from page 80]  

Chris North, Dombover [from page 62]  
1. To meet EOD level-two qualifications, a deminer must have specific training in disposal by detonation of larger UXO and artillery ammunition up to 240 mm. A level-three deminer should be qualified to render safe UXO for safe removal from the demining workings and to undertake their final destruction.
2. These books can only be purchased by contacting Chris North at Chrisnordover9@btinternet.com or through his publisher, The Old Put Press.