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The Southern African Development Community's Technical Advisors Course

With funding and support from South African and international groups, the SADC teams up with IMEESA to improve deminers' management and technology skills.

By Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Sollie Schreuder and Kevin Bolton, Director, IMEESA

Background

The Institute for Military Engineering Excellence in Southern Africa (IMEESA) originated from the veterans' organization of the South African Engineer Corps' Sappers Association. When the Sappers Association changed its role, functions and structure, IMEESA was formed to lend a futuristic approach to the organization and to make its expertise available for humanitarian assistance in Africa. As a non-profit company (Section 21), IMEESA is not associated with the military.

The strength of IMEESA lies in its military engineering expertise. This expertise ranges from basic to strategic levels making it available to countries in Africa for humanitarian assistance ranging from mine action to development projects, disaster relief and management services and training.

At the end of World War II, the

Sappers Association acquired the Sappers Headquarters in order to train returning Sappers in vocational skills. This was done to help fellow Sappers reintegrate into society after the war. Today, they utilize the beautiful, tranquil headquarter's land with the infrastructure that was inherited to train people to help bring an end to the legacy of landmines in Southern Africa.

Introduction

In the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Angola and Mozambique have seen their socioeconomic development affected by landmines more than any other countries. The other countries in the SADC affected by landmines are Zimbabwe, Malawi and Namibia. Unfortunately, not much is known regarding the landmine situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Throughout these SADC countries, warring parties in numerous conflicts continue to complicate the landmine problem by laying additional mines.

Effects of landmines in the SADC include the following:

- *Agricultural.* Subsistence farmers often cannot work their land due to the presence of mines.
- *Industrial.* Mines can deny access to factories.
- *Societal.* Casualties increase on a daily basis, creating an additional burden on the families of the victims and the region's already insufficient and drained medical facilities.

A single undetected landmine can have a similar, if not worse, effect on an area as 200 detected mines. It is highly important that demining operations be well planned and synchronized with local and regional government priorities.

Significance of the Course

The deminers who train and work in Southern Africa's landmine-infested countries are among the best available in the world today. For this reason, many private demining companies employ Southern African-trained deminers in projects around the world. What is lacking in the region, however, are management and technology skills—skills required to manage large-scale demining projects

and to evaluate technology, systems and processes available to execute the task. To address this deficiency, the SADC Secretariat in Gaborone, Botswana, in conjunction with the South African Department of Foreign Affairs and the European Commission, formed the IMEESA Technical Advisors Course.

The course, which is the first of its kind in Africa, allows students to develop into the core of an elite African demining management group. As the SADC's core demining group, the successful students will be expected to use their expertise in playing a pioneer role in improving the standard of demining management and related activities in their respective countries.

The Course

The aim of the IMEESA course is to qualify students as national mine action technical advisors by covering the full spectrum of knowledge that being an advisor in Southern Africa demands. The course's fast pace requires students to focus on keeping up with the curriculum, which concentrates on the practical aspects of the specialist field.

Subjects addressed during the course include the following:

- Strategic overview of mine action in Southern Africa
- Use of landmines and origin of the mine problem

- Humanitarian mine action: the general approach
- Mine action survey and landmine information systems
- Landmine detection techniques
- Landmine neutralization techniques
- Safety and protection of personnel
- Planning, preparation and management of mine action projects
- Financial and logistical planning as related to the management of mine action projects
- Quality Assurance (QA)
- Mine awareness
- Mine action research project

The first class of students to enroll in the course graduated in December 2000. The course ran for four weeks, meeting six days a week from the early hours of the morning into the night. One highlight of the course was a visit to Denel's Mechem in Pretoria, South Africa for a terrain demonstration and a later visit to its Dog Centre where one could see the Mechem Explosive Detecting Dogs System (MEDD) in action. Another highlight was a practical navigation exercise performed at night using satellite navigation equipment.

At the end of the 26-day course, the students were honored with gifts from Professor Magwase and SADC mine action project coordinator Joao Ndlovu of the SADC Mine Action

Committee. Magwase spoke to the students about the roles they are expected to play in mine action in their home countries before giving each student a course diploma.

Conclusion

The SADC-sponsored course was considered challenging for both the students and the training team. This is reassuring in a field where shortcuts often lead to death or serious injury. Instructors must always consider this fact as they train students to face the inherent dangers in their home countries' mine situations. Through its efforts, IMEESA has proven that the mine action community in Southern Africa, with the aid of its significant international donors, has the technical and managerial expertise to deal with its landmine problems. ■

**All Photos courtesy of IMEESA.*

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■ (L-R) Syndicate work in South Africa. Joseph Zhou receives his diploma from Professor Magwase. The mine action students pose in front of the Sappers Headquarters.

