

Landmines in Latin America



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AUSTCARE, Assisting Mine-Affected Communities

Since 1989 AUSTCARE has been actively involved in mine action programs worldwide. The organization works closely with other groups to ensure the safety of people living in mine-affected countries.

by **Stacy L. Smith**, MAIC

Mine Clearance Involvement

In 1967 AUSTCARE was founded as a non-profit independent organization to benefit the lives of refugees, displaced people and their host communities. As "Australia's own refugee assistance agency," AUSTCARE supports various programs that encompass a range of solutions to problems posed by landmines/UXO, including emergency assistance and long-term rehabilitation and development.

AUSTCARE's involvement in mine action activities began in 1989. Since then, the organization has implemented 20 landmine-related projects, many with the help of partnerships with local NGOs within mine-affected countries. Aside from these partnerships, AUSTCARE also teams with international organizations such as HALO Trust, Handicap International (HI), Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and Norwegian People's Aid to safely return people to their communities after mine clearance operations are completed. The tailored goals of these projects "enable refugees, displaced persons and returnees to access land and areas in safety in order to meet their daily needs," according to AUSTCARE Marketing and Fundraising Officer, Marcia Balzer. This is carried out through mine/UXO clearance, mine field mapping and verification, victim rehabilitation and mine awareness education funded by AUSTCARE.

Assessing Needs in Affected Countries

After extensive research is conducted to define the impact and scope of landmine-affected countries, AUSTCARE selects projects based on each individual country's needs. In the past, AUSTCARE has emphasized health and education in its projects, making a country's need for these programs an important factor in the selection criteria. Balzer explains that AUSTCARE considers factors from a diverse group of sources when gathering information and making the ultimate decision to fund mine clearance operations in a specific country. Along with AUSTCARE's conditions for organizational mandates, other organizations' tentative plans for targeted countries and current status reports issued by the United Nations, country governments and local NGOs are reviewed. In addition, feedback from all parties involved in the project including that of the affected people and the affected country's government is considered. Currently, AUSTCARE has mine action projects in Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia, Cambodia and Mozambique. Next year, AUSTCARE anticipates proposals for new projects in Afghanistan, Cambodia and Angola.



A young Cambodian boy near O'Preal Village, Samrong District, uses an old

Current Projects

Afghanistan

In June 1999 AUSTCARE funded a unique mine awareness project providing radios to remote communities to enable listeners in mine-affected regions of Afghanistan to hear broadcasts of mine-awareness-education programs. These broadcasts are targeted at young listeners, who are frequently injured while playing in unmarked mine fields.

Angola

Working with HI, AUSTCARE began providing physical and social rehabilitation to landmine victims in Angola's Benguela province in 1997. AUSTCARE incorporated members of the Angolan community into the project by training Angolan technicians to make prosthetics for victims.

In 2001, the rehabilitation project continues with technicians producing approximately 800 prosthetic feet each month. The prosthetic feet are designed specifically for landmine victims in the Angolan population. The feet are able to withstand the country's rigid terrain and feature customized coloring to match the patient's skin color.

Bosnia

In 1998 AUSTCARE partnered with Norwegian People's Aid to clear Bosnia's mine fields with the help of mine detection dog (MDD) teams. This ongoing project involves training nine existing MDDs and two new MDDs to clear 4,500 sq. m of land. With this level of productivity, AUSTCARE hopes to significantly reduce the threat of landmines/UXO in Bosnia.

Cambodia

In Ta Peng Village's Kulen Mountains, AUSTCARE now manages a project initially started by the Australian government's Destroy-A-Minefield program. The project has been divided into two phases. Phase One, which began in January 2000, cleared 54,000 sq. m of land in six months. AUSTCARE anticipates that Phase Two, which began in July 2000, will allow approximately 89 families to resettle in their respective communities.



A Cambodian deminer at Khomphong Thom.



A manual deminer removes an uncovered mine in a Ta Peng minefield, Kulen Mountain, Siem Reap.



A fragment pit at a minefield in Khomphong Thom, Cambodia.

Working with HALO, AUSTCARE has also undertaken a mine clearance project in O'Preal Village in the Samrong District of Siem Reap. In June 2000 the partner organizations started Phase One of a mine clearance project that is estimated to eventually clear 100,000 sq. m of land. Phase Two will allow villagers to utilize another 150,000 sq. m of inaccessible land. Villagers involved in the clearance project "prioritize the areas for clearing and determine the use of cleared land," according to Balzer. In addition, villagers are recruited to learn demining techniques for future use.

This project will be completed in two years.

Mozambique

Since 1994 AUSTCARE has implemented mine clearance projects in Mozambique using MDDs to locate mine fields. Recently, AUSTCARE began a mine-clearance project in Inham-bane Province along with HI. This project will survey 14 districts to pinpoint and record areas that may contain landmines/UXO. After these areas are identified, AUSTCARE and HI teams will also carry out demining operations in these districts.

Conclusion

AUSTCARE's humanitarian efforts and comprehensive approach to aiding people and communities affected by the threat of landmines have led to the implementation and success of 20 landmine-related projects. With assistance from partner organizations, AUSTCARE enables refugees, displaced persons and returnees to reenter their communities and thrive without the presence of landmines or UXO.

**All photos courtesy of AUSTCARE*

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