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RONCO: Back in Afghanistan

More than ten years after helping develop its demining capability, RONCO returns to Afghanistan, renewing old partnerships to tackle new problems.

by JJ Scott, MAIC

The Return

As part of their Integrated Mine Action Support (IMAS) contract with the U.S. State Department, demining company RONCO has returned to Afghanistan to carry out two new task orders. Ten years ago, RONCO helped develop Afghanistan's indigenous demining capacity. This time around, with only two-dozen employees in the country, RONCO is taking more of a management/support role rather than conducting heavy-duty demining with their own resources. Mr. Dave Lundberg, a RONCO Vice President, says, "There's real talent, real capability over there. We're just helping the Afghans do what they do in a more effective, updated manner." This attitude of cooperation instead of domination allows RONCO to work much more efficiently with the Afghan people to complete the State Department's new Tasks. One of the tasks is purely humanitarian while the other involves joint international military objectives. Both are outlined below.

Task Order 1

Under the first task order, RONCO is providing commodities, training, advice and assistance to Regional Mine Action Centers (RMACs) throughout Afghanistan. Mr. Lundberg reports that "since the bombing campaign, there is a lot of new UXO there that they don't know how to handle," so RONCO will conduct several training sessions to educate the Afghans on the new threats facing their country. RONCO is working closely with the UN and the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan (UNOCHA), but is re-

sponsible to the State Department. This arrangement allows maximum efficiency while ensuring that State Department objectives are achieved. Team members arrived in Afghanistan on January 20 and are scheduled to remain for 6 months in compliance with the task order.

RONCO deployed 11 people under Task Order 1, including one task leader and RMAC Advisor and EOD/demining technicians. Another EOD technician will alternate RONCO deployed one senior dog manager to Afghanistan to check up on the dog center (which RONCO founded in the early 1990's with U.S. government funds). "These are all highly trained individuals. Seven of the 11 people are EOD certified specialists," Mr. Lundberg informed me. Another large segment of Task Order 1 is delivery of over \$1 million in equipment to the UN's general Mine Action Program (MAP). Needed commodities include ambulances and other transport equipment, magnetic detectors and other demining supplies.

Task Order 2

While Task Order 1 focuses primarily on humanitarian demining, Task Order 2 leans more toward military demining alongside the International Coalition. This Task is significantly smaller in scale than Task Order 1, though just as vital. The State Department, in conjunction with U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), tasked RONCO to provide quality assurance around the two major airports used by Coalition forces in Afghanistan. In response to State Department desires, RONCO brought eight of their own mine detecting dogs (MDDs) along with their handlers into Afghanistan to execute this Task. The dogs will search for landmines and provide quality assurance

around the airports in hopes that they can prevent more mine accidents from claiming Coalition victims. A senior RONCO manager and experienced dog trainer accompanied the team to oversee all work done under Task Order 2.

Cooperation

Mr. Lundberg explained that RONCO has enjoyed such a warm reception from the Afghans because the company is intimately familiar with the country and its demining organizations. Some of the RONCO personnel sent to complete these new Task Orders are veterans of the Afghanistan MAP, so they are renewing old friendships with their Afghan compatriots while they work. "Instead of taking over, we like to form a partnership with the Afghan demining community. We trained a lot of the demining players in Afghanistan, so there is almost a homecoming feeling to our return," Mr. Lundberg says.

Conclusion

By building on the unique relationship that RONCO and Afghanistan have forged over the years, RONCO hopes to quickly upgrade Afghan planning and demining capabilities, rapidly clear UXO and landmines, and help the country bring land back into agricultural production. Once again, RONCO will help the stoic Afghan people reclaim their land, leading to a safer and more prosperous nation. ■

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