Update: The Mine Action Situation in Afghanistan

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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 out 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 responsible 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 13 people under Task Order 1, including one task leader and RMAC Advisor and EO/Demining technicians. Another EOD technician will alternate RONCO deployed one sector dog manager to Afghanistan to check on the dog center (which RONCO founded in the early 1990s with U.S. government funding). "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 directives, RONCO brought eight of their own mine detecting dogs (MDMs) 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 counterparts 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 begin 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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no 10 million landmines prior to September 11th. Now workers face the challenge of removing newly deposited munitions (namely cluster bombs) and pieces of UXO. New surveys are being conducted to assess the full extent of these additional artileries. Furthermore, all mine action personnel will need to address unexploded ordnance (UXO) which is a reoccurring threat and have been conducting training courses while waiting for conditions to improve. In addition to the time that has been lost as a result of the war on terrorism, a significant amount of communications equipment, company vehicles and other necessary supplies were lost during the withdrawal of Taliban forces on many of the NGO offices. This shortage of supplies has prevented yet another impediment for mine action NGOs from resuming operations in Afghanistan. Many workers have been forced to use outdated protective equipment and demining supplies, which makes operations less reliable and efficient than before. Fortunately, this equipment is being quickly replaced as international donors continue to fund the war efforts.

Finally, the entire mine action community (both locally and globally) has been forced to cope with the lives lost in these recent months. The first blow to the community occurred when a stray missile struck the Afghan Technical Consultants (ATC) office in Kabul, injuring three and killing UN security guards and injuring four others. In addition, the Mine Dog Center (MDC) lost two Mine Detection Dogs (MDDs) when a bomb struck a MDC training area, destroying one of the kennels and other parts of the location. Despite these devastating losses, the Mine Action Program for Afghanistan (MAPA) affiliates are still fully dedicated to helping Afghani civilians by ridding their land of mines.

Donor Support

MAPA has received a significant amount of donor support, in order to replenish lost supplies and further build its programs to handle newly posed threats in the area. As reported in mid-January, the anticipated budget for fully resuming the mine action programs in Afghanistan totaled $47 million (U.S.), with a little less than $9 million still outstanding. All programs are being developed as if these funds are received and directed to specific programs based on donor requests.

Many of the necessary funds were secured in response to the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan, held in Tokyo, Japan, on January 21, 2000. A total of $15.4 million to replenish equipment and staff and $2.8 million to coordinating programs. The European Commission designated $10 million towards survey, clearance and training efforts. The United States budgeted $7 million for deploying EOD experts and replacing equipment as well as for implementing training, mine awareness and NGO clearance operations. Additional funds were appropriated from AusAid, Bulgaria, France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Resuming Operations

After looking over the events of the past six months and considering the impact they have left on Afghan territory, mine action officials plan to restore and further expand all mine action programs over the course of this year, continuing to make MAPA one of the most efficient and cost-effective mine action programs in the world. As of January 15, 2002, all 15 of the mine action experts on the MAPA team have returned to the country, ridding up to 90 percent of mine action activities. Currently, the priorities of mine action are being re-evaluated to address the latest needs. These priorities include:

• Recovering lost equipment from air strikes and Taliban attacks on NGO offices.

• Retraining personnel.

• Resuming the survey and verification of infested territory.

• Assisting emergency response teams throughout the country.

Although the full extent is unknown at the time, landmines/UXO-related injuries have increased dramatically since September as a result of these new hazards and an increase in movement throughout the country. Until this threat is remedied, the country cannot be fully rehabilitated. Consequently, clearing landmines, in order to assist relief organizations, has become a top priority in Afghanistan.

Most mine action workers have been briefed and trained on the new hazards presented by recent conflicts. Additional mine action experts are necessary to continue preparing mine action personnel for the latest threats. A Landmine Impact Survey (LIS) will be conducted to assess the necessary impact of the current landmine/UXO situation, in order to establish up-to-date priorities and project plans.

In order to further build the mine action capacity, the main offices of the Mine Action Center for Afghanistan (MACA) and MGD are developing training agreements with NGOs and UN affiliates working with MAPA are being relocated from Afghanistan to Pakistan. As a result, these organizations will be able to better establish a program by working within the country, instead of operating from the outside. Relocating the training center is one of the many ways that the mine action community is able to excel in Afghanistan now that the threat of Taliban forces no longer exists. Additionally, workers will be able to implement programs in the northern region of the country, where they were previously prohibited from working.

Providing Awareness

As always, providing awareness to Afghan civilians, especially refugees and IDPs migrating back to their homes, is a key component of the mine action program. As a result of the newly laid landmines and the influx of movement throughout the country, mine awareness programs have also had to be restructured. Once an area has been surveyed, cleared and verified, refugees and IDPs have to be directed to safe settlement areas and equipped with the capability to find food, water, and other necessities in the area. Many of the relief organizations have provided mine awareness programs in communities as the opened transportation in and out of the country. In addition to clearing the Afghan territory, and helping communities as they begin to rebuild the country, workers are attempting to rid the lands of this threat.

Conclusion

The United Nations Office for Coordination Assistance (UNOCHA) estimates that over $350 million dollars in economic revenue has been lost due to landmine/UXO hindrances in the past 12 years. Prior to September 2001. Fortunately, Afghanistan hosts one of the most efficient and cost-effective mine action programs in the world, returning an average of $4.60 for every dollar spent. Now that security conditions have been restored and operations are almost back in full swing, the aiding bodies of Afghanistan can begin rehabilitating the country once more.

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Seated in a circle on the ground, boys play an educational board game that includes landmine awareness features, part of a UNICEF-funded landmine education project in Kabul.

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