The Latin America Conference: Sharing Ideas to Improve Mine Action

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Home Made Mines

Despite the fact that a lot of modern weapons (including modern landmines) are used in Afghanistan, a lot of homemade devices are also in use. Finding a pile of empty artillery and tank shell cases, as well as exploded aerial bombs and other kinds of munitions, clearly indicates that the place is used for explosive devices manufacturing. When constructing combat actions, it is strongly advised not to leave empty artillery and tank shell cases in the area. They will be carefully collected by the enemy, filled with explosives and used as anti-vehicle mines. If the situation permits, collect them, put them together and run a tank over them to make them unusable. Finding great amounts of cheap soap and empty glass bottles indicates the production site of Molotov cocktails. Soap is great, placed in a bottle, covered with gas. Thrown on a vehicle, the bottle breaks, and the burning mixture of soap and gas sticks to the vehicle's body.

If your convoy or a military unit has to camp for the night along the road, be very careful in choosing the place for your bivouac. Because of mountainous terrain, there are only a limited number of flat and safe places for such camps, and the enemy is aware that the convoy will most likely stop in this particular place. So there is a very high possibility that the place will be mined. Pay special attention to checking for mines at the points where the convoy leaves the main road to camp alongside. Try not to use the exit from the main road that has been used by previous convoys.

Be aware that animals (usually donkeys and camels) can be used to deliver explosive charges to military bases and fighting camps, shopping areas, houses and other public places frequently attacked by troops. These tactics have been used in Kabul at the shopping area near the residential district populated by Soviet military advisors and Afghan government officials. The animals (donkeys) were carrying some merchandise and accompanied by several freedom fighters posing as delivery people or traders. After reaching the area, they left quickly, and the charges hidden under merchandise had been remotely detonated. Be aware of unattended vehicles with loads on their back.

Navigating the Mined Irrigation Canals

All populated areas in Afghanistan (villages, towns) have well developed irrigation agricultural systems consisting of water canals and irrigation ditches (Aqai or Jui in Dari language). The local population uses simple but effective methods to direct flow of water by creating little clay and soil dams. To prevent loss of water from evaporation, water distribution usually takes place in the evenings and nights. If directed into dry creek beds and irrigation canals, water turns clay and sand into the bottomline mud, making them significantly more difficult to cross. Drivers have to stop to go in low gear. The distance between villages becomes shorter, making them easy targets. Home vehicle gets stuck in a canal, the entire convoy comes to a halt. Such crossings - and especially on considerably flat terrain and especially when surrounded by green vegetation areas - are good places for ambushes and may be mined as well. If your troops are in the area, be cautious if water flows coming into such irrigation canals especially during the hot time of day. It is usually a clear indication of hostile activity in the area mingling with camps are more common and organize ambushes at crossings.

Local Support

Using the help of local authorities, tribal leaders, field commanders, village elders, etc., divide the roads frequently used by military or humanitarian convoys, into the zones of responsibility between local tribes and villages located along these roads. Request local populations to organize and maintain permanent surveillance of the roads and report any hostile or suspicious activity in their areas of responsibility such as individuals laying mines, or destroying or damaging bridges and other road facilities, and any armed groups presence or movement through the area. Reward them for good information by providing food, medical supplies and fuel.

Information Gathering

Local bazaars and trading centers can be a good source of information about the mine situation in the area. Watch what routes and roads locals use to bring agricultural goods and other merchandise for the crops they grow on the fields they cultivate. Pay attention to the movement of refugees and nomads in the area: their routes usually indicate what roads are safe from mines.

Conclusion

In Afghanistan, you can survive an ambush. You can fight the enemy in the mountains and in caves, because you know where he is and can use a weapon of your choice to defeat him. Landmines are an invisible and treacherous enemy, and this makes them especially dangerous. When Soviet units in Afghanistan were deploying for combat from their locations, drivers used to wish each other "clear route." So let me wish the same for American and international troops on the ground in Afghanistan.

Biography

Timothy Guinnon served two tours of duty in Afghanistan as an area specialist for military inter- preters with Russian military advisors, Soviet troops and Special Operations (Special Operations) units. He speaks Dari (Afghan) and Farsi (Iran) languages. His duties included facilitating coordination and liai- son between Afghan government troops and So- viet units, and negotiating with local authorities, tribal leaders and field commanders. He has been wounded twice in the leg and red tape on his uniform are the Russian equivalent of Purple Heart Medals. He has been awarded a number of orders and medals, including the Order of Red Star, and promoted to the rank of Major at the age of 28. After the Gulf War in 1991, he was the United Nations military observer/inspector-officer in the UN Kosovo and Russian missions. He resides in the United States.

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The Latin America Conference: Sharing Ideas to Improve Mine Action

In early December of 2001, mine action affiliates gathered in Miami to discuss the past, present and future of mine action efforts in Latin America. The three-day conference gave all who attended a better idea of what lies ahead and allowed them to share ideas on how to reach their mutual goals.

by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

Introduction

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) and the Organization of Ameri- can States (OAS) co-sponsored a regional landmine conference about Latin America on December 3-5, 2001. James Madison University's (JMU) Mine Ac- tion Information Center (MAIC) and the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) hosted the event, which took place in Miami, Florida. The conference was designed to bring together different key players involved in mine action efforts in Latin America so that they could learn from each other and improve their own efforts through contact with one another.

The conference consisted of 35 pre- sentations given by various mine action personnel on topics including information management, lessons learned in in- dividual countries, socio-economic surv- eys, technology used in the field and vic- tim assistance. Each panel of presenta- tions was followed by a question and answer period during which participants could ask questions or add their com- ments to the presenters. Throughout the conference, it was easy to see how closely related all of the presented topics are and how necessary each one is to the overall goals of mine action.

The Topics

Over the course of the three-day conference, 10 panels gave presentations on the following topics: General Program Activities, Socio-economic Impact Survey, Mine Risk Awareness and Prevention, and Education Programs, Standards, Training and Coordination for Demining Opera- tions, Lessons Learned from Humanitarian Demining Programs, Victim Assist- ance, Non-Governmental Organization Perspectives, Information Management Systems, Humanitarian Demining Tech- nologies and Future Challenges.

Day One

Day One consisted of General Pre- sentations and two other panels. The pre- sentations progressed as follows:

General Presentations:
1. The OAS's Mine Action Program and the support they receive from the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB)
2. The Office of Mine Action Initiatives and Partnerships
3. The DOS Humanitarian Demining (HED) Strategic Plan
4. The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS)
Day Three
During the final day of the conference, panels six, seven and eight gave the following presentations:

Panel Six (Information Management Systems):
- Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSSA) Background and Structure.
- IMSSA Implementation in Nicaragua.
- IMSSA Regional Office.
- Panel Seven (Humanitarian Demining Technologies):
  - Humanitarian Demining Research and Development.
  - Alternative Technologies.
  - Canadian Co-Operative for Mine Action Technologies (CCMAT).
- Panel Eight (Future Challenges):
  - Colombian Perspectives.
  - Peruvian Perspectives.
  - Ecuadorian Perspectives.
  - Canadian Perspectives.

Common Threads
Throughout the conference, a number of themes came up numerous times and acted as common threads between different topics. In addition to being mentioned in panel presentations, question and answer sessions and audience comments, these common threads were brought up in the final discussion and summary session, as they were obviously universal issues that many mine action programs have to face. Conference attendees hoped that mine action personnel would address these topics in the near future.

Day Two
Day Two consisted of presentations panels three, four and five as follows:

Panel Three, Part One (Standards, Training and Coordination for Demining Operations):
- UNMAS, on the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS).
- MARMINCAR, on its role in international supervision.
- SOUTHCOM, on the HD support it provides.
- U.S. Army Humanitarian Demining Training Center (HDTC), on its HD training.

Panel Three, Part Two (Lessons Learned):
- Honduras.
- Nicaragua.
- Guatemala.

Panel Four (Victim Assistance):
- PAHO and the Tripartite Victim Assistance Initiative.
- Tripartite Victim Assistance Initiative in Central America.
- Comprehensive Victim Assistance.

Panel Five (Non-Governmental Organization Perspectives):
- Programs of the Center for International Rehabilitation.
- Victim Assistance in Guatemala.
- Handicap International (HI).

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Access to Information
One of the major obstacles facing mine action programs today is gaining access to the information they need to carry out demining and mine awareness activities. One of the significant observations made at the end of the conference was that "a strategic and coordinated plan is essential to a progressive and successful program," and without access to essential, fundamental information, an effective mine action strategy cannot be planned and executed. In general, accessing landmine casualty data can be difficult, which was an issue this conference addressed several times. Sometimes records are not kept well, and often there are privacy issues or various political and medical reasons that cause the data to be confidential or not reliable to some organizations. Additionally, a number of different types of information vital to the success of a mine action program were discussed, including Socioeconomic Impact Surveys, language translation and geographic information system (GIS) products.

Socioeconomic Impact Surveys are very valuable, but they are also expensive. As Dennis Barlow stated in the wrap-up session, "When done, they need to be established with regard to the local landmine reality." Impact Surveys are critical to set requirements for where mine action programs go, but they take a long time and are hard to design.

Language translation is a huge issue for mine action, especially in Latin America. The standard language for producing landmine information is usually English, but all too often, the end users of this information are not native English speakers. Translation in Latin America and elsewhere is especially important as a requirement to disseminate mine action data, products and standards.

Mine action personnel at the conference expressed a core need for GIS products and accessibility to them. One of the main problems with getting access to this information is that the people involved in mine action sometimes do not even know it exists. Also, the people sometimes know the information is there, but it cannot be accessed because of its sensitive nature or because of the cost. Several attendees suggested that if can be an issue, mine action agencies should cooperate with other agencies or groups that would also benefit from GIS information.

One positive aspect of information access discussed at the conference was the IMSMA System. Many speakers discussed the system in their presentations, which shows that it is becoming a universal standard. Because the system is available at low cost to mine action programs, it is a helpful and easily accessible tool to implement in mine action programs, and it significantly lessens the problem of information access.

Safety and Training
Safety and training are two major issues in mine action, and this was evident from the amount of time spent discussing these two topics at this conference. As was stated in the wrap-up period, "Safety must be addressed not just once, but continually, especially by any organization charged with overseeing or monitoring a demining program." This observation was made in its reference to the regional aspect and the oversight of various parts of mine action, especially QA. As far as training, the general feeling from the conference was that demining training would be more beneficial if it involved greater Exploitive Ordinance Disposal (EOD) expertise and education.

Coordinating Efforts
Lastly, conference attendees agreed that it is important to coordinate efforts with other in the field in order to make a mine-free world a feasible goal. Nowadays, there are so many mine action-related activities in the works that there is a greater need for the involved parties to communicate with one another and share their successes and failures. The conference itself was a testimony to this need. In his final comments, Dennis Barlow referred to what he called the "Miami Challenge," which is a proposed regional mine action group meeting to discuss and share experiences related to existing mine action efforts.

*All photos courtesy of IMAC.

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*Proceedings for this conference are available online at www.maic.jmu.edu/conference/latinamerica/index.html.

Proceedings from the conference are available in Spanish and English.

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