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The Latin America Conference: Sharing Ideas to Improve Mine Action

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Home Made Mines

Despite the fact that a lot of roadside weapons (including modern landmines) are used in Afghanistan, a lot of homemade devices are also in use. Finding a hole of empty artillery tank shells could as well explode. Navigating the mined irrigation canals can be a good source of information about the mine situation in the area. Watch what roads and routes locals use to bring agricultural goods and other merchandise for trade home. Pay attention to the movement of refugees and nomads in the area; their routes usually indicate what roads are safe from mines.

Information Gathering

Local bazaars and trading centers can be a good source of information about the mine situation in the area. Watch what roads and routes locals use to bring agricultural goods and other merchandise for trade home. 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. Do not make him fight on the same front, on his terms, and in his area. Mines are an invisible and treacherous enemy, and this makes them especially dangerous. When Soviet Union in Afghanistan were being fought for combat from their locations, drivers used to wash each other "clean route." So let me wish the same for American and international troops on the ground in Afghanistan.

Background

Timothy Gucunski served two tours of duty in Afghanistan as an area specialist/military inter-Preer with Russian military advisors, Soviet troops and Spetsnaz (Special Operations) units. He speaks Dari (Afghanistan) and Farsi (Iran) languages. His duties included facilitating coordination and liai-Asions between Afghan government troops and So- viet forces, and negotiating with local authorities, tribe leaders and field commanders. He has been wounded twice, lost the yellow and red strips on his uniform are the Russian equivalent of Purple Heart Medals. He has been awarded a number of awards 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 States military observer liaison officer in the UN leap Kuwait 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 officials 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 American States (OAS) co-sponsored a regional landmine conference about Latin America on December 3–5, 2001. James Madison University's (JMU) Mine Action 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 on 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 individual countries, socio-economic surveys, technology used in the field and victim assistance. Each panel of presenta- tions was followed by a brief question and answer period during which participants could ask questions or add their comments to the presentations. 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 Sur- veys, Mine Risk Awareness and Prevention 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 Presentations and two other panels. The present-ations progressed as follows:

General Presentations:
• The OAS's Mine Action Program and the support they receive from the Inter-American Defense Board (OAS),
• The Office of Mine Action Initiatives and Partnerships,
• The DOS Humanitarian Demining (HID) Strategic Plan,
• The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS).

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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 Center 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.

Funding Funding continues to be a major concern, especially when supporting the funding for mine action. Dennis Barklow of MAC said the all-to-common experience of "running out of gas very near the end and how frustrating that is." The fear of "donor fatigue"—a donor ceasing to fund projects—is one that troubles many people involved in mine action. The concern was brought up several times, and a number of people made suggestions on how to prevent it. The most recurrent suggestions were to be creative in attracting donations, and to keep them involved in the project and abreast of the progress of their mission so they know that their money is being well spent. Another problem with the funding aspect of mine action is that program personnel often do not know where to look for funding. Many programs are experiencing a lack of funds, and they may not know about available funding and support resources available to them. Conversely, there are also a number of organizations ready and willing to provide whatever assistance they can give, but they do not know who needs their help unless these people approach the organizations personally. This conference addressed both of these issues and opened up the lines of communication between groups with available funding and people in need of these resources.

Roles in Mine Action The roles of both military and civilian personnel in mine action were referred to several times during the Miami conference. Many find that the military's role in mine action is often misunderstood but that it can be seen as an integral and critical part of a national program. With its structure and its experienced staff, the military can play an important coordinating role in mine action programs. Also, speakers at the conference emphasized that civilians should have a role in mine action, and above all, those in affected areas should be involved in the process so they feel that they are playing an active role in solving the problem they face.

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 mentioned 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 releasable 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 Barklow 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 what is out there. Also, they 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 cost is 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 IMSSA system. Many speakers discussed the use of systems 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.

Day Four Day Four consisted of presentation 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), • MARMINGA, on its role in international supervision. • SOUTHCOM, on the HD support it provides. • U.S. Army Humanitarian Demining Training Center (HTDC), on its HD training.

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Proceedings from this conference are available online at www.maiq.jmu.edu/conference/latinamericas/index.html.

The Latin America Conference

Safety and Training Safety and training are two major issues in mine action, and this fact 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 an organization charged with overseeing or monitoring a demining program." This observation was made in reference to the regional aspects 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 Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) expertise and education.

Coordinating Efforts Lastly, conference attendees agreed that it is important to coordinate efforts with others in the field in order to make a mine-free world a feasible goal. Nowadays, there are so many mine action-realted 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 Barklow 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 events.