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The United States Humanitarian Mine Action Program: Helping Countries “Get on Their Feet”

Since 1988, the U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action Program (formerly Humanitarian Demining Program) has been involved in mine action efforts around the globe. While much has been written about the program over the past few years, it is useful to review its fundamentals if only to remind ourselves of its policy and procedural aspects.

Introduction

With respect to demining and the other core elements of humanitarian mine action, the United States has been engaged since 1988, helping mine-affected countries worldwide to develop programs that remedy the problem created by landmines and UXO. These programs range from providing mine risk education (MRE) to training, equipping, and operating a cadre of deminers and coordinating their work with the country’s national demining organizations. The latter represents the high end of U.S. support and is designed to develop and sustain indigenous mine action programs. This article does not focus on assistance to landmine survivors, for which the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) Leaky War Victims Fund holds primary responsibility.

The U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action Program seeks to relieve human suffering while promoting U.S. interests, with the objectives of reducing civilian casualties, creating conditions for the safe return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes, fostering regional stability, facilitating economic and social recovery, and encouraging international cooperation and participation. By the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2003, the United States will have provided over $700 million (U.S.) to support mine action initiatives in 44 countries.

Obtaining U.S. Demining Assistance

When a mine-affected country desires the support of the U.S. government, it generally requests assistance via the U.S. Embassy. If the Embassy endorses the request, it is then submitted to an interagency process headed by the National Security Council (NSC). Participating in this process are the Department of State (DOS), the Department of Defense (DoD), the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), USAID, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Upon receiving a U.S. Embassy-endorsed request for assistance, the interagency process evaluates the request as to whether to conduct a Policy Assessment. Visit to assess the nature of the mine/UXO problem, the requesting country’s need to solve the problem and the suitability of U.S. assistance. Based on this assessment, the interagency process may lead to the establishment of a formal program for the country.

Categories of Assistance

U.S. mine action support encompasses four traditional pillars identified by the international community: MRE, victim assistance, mine detection and clearance, and landmine impact surveys conducted to determine the socioeconomic impact of mines and UXO. The United States does not fund stockpile destruction, believing that stockpiles do not pose an immediate threat to safety and health.

A typical U.S. program might consist of assisting the establishment of a mine action center (MAC), an MRE program, and a mine detection and clearance program that develops its mine clearance capabilities, the United States, again relying on the interagency process, will periodically evaluate the development of programs that meet their needs and its capacity and to determine when a country achieves sustainability—the point when the host nation has demonstrated its ability to manage and coordinate all aspects of its humanitarian mine action, including using its own resources to finance mine action activities. When a country begins sustainability, U.S. support naturally diminishes, although replenishment of equipment and the provision of periodic technical assistance might still be necessary.

U.S. Funding and Participation

The vast majority of U.S. funding support for humanitarian mine action comes from the Department of Defense (DoD), the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), USAID, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Upon receiving a U.S. Embassy-endorsed request for assistance, the interagency process evaluates the request as to whether to conduct a Policy Assessment. Visit to assess the nature of the mine/UXO problem, the requesting country’s need to solve the problem and the suitability of U.S. assistance. Based on this assessment, the interagency process may lead to the establishment of a formal program for the country.

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**FOCUS**

**Deminers, Manual Demining & PPE**

(Left to Right) A Bosnian MDD team, A deminer in Vietnam.

**Mine Detection Dogs—Working for the Government**

The term “man’s best friend” takes on a different connotation when dogs are placed in mine-affected countries. “Man’s best friend” can be construed to be “man’s best hero” because mine detection dogs (MDDs) offer another means for the reliable detection of landmines and UXO. Mine and UXO clearance operations occur in a wide variety of climates, over a broad spectrum of terrain and under the influence of many different cultures. While the demining technique will be successful in all scenarios, combinations of detection technologies and demining methods generally increase safety and efficiency and contribute to high-quality, productive mine clearance executed in accordance with international humanitarian demining standards developed by the United Nations. There are approximately 620 MDDs around the world conducting operations or in training; 162 of these dogs are in Afghanistan. The U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action Program has provided dogs to 18 countries around the world: Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Eritrea, Honduras, Lebanon, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Oman, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Thailand.

**Country Program Accomplishments**

Since 1993, the United States has established humanitarian demining programs in 44 countries and will likely add more countries in 2003 and beyond. At the same time, a number of countries will “graduate” from the U.S. program, having achieved sustainment status. The United States, other donors and mine-affected countries can take pride in a number of significant accomplishments as described below.

**Afghanistan**

Among the very first of its kind, the Mine Action Program for Afghanistan has become known as an effective demining program. MRE/briefings have reached over seven million people; the landmine casualty rate has been reduced by 50 percent; Afghan deminers have cleared 1,171 square kilometers of high-priority mine-infested land and destroyed 210,000 landmines and 985,000 pieces of UXO, and 1.5 million refugees have been able to return to their homes.

**Cambodia**

Except for an ability to finance in own operations, the humanitarian demining program in Cambodia is now in sustainment, with a fully trained staff of 2,600 Cambodians. 35 foreign technical advisors and six UN staff members. Deminers working under the auspices of the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) have cleared 97,662,880 square meters of land, destroyed 159,789 landmines and 680,627 pieces of UXO, and reduced landmine casualties by almost 70 percent.

**Guinea-Bissau**

Since January 2000, the NGO HUMAID has cleared over half of the entire suspected mines-infested land in Guinea-Bissau, rendering 257,178 square meters mine safe. Nearly 3,000 mines and over 13,333 pieces of UXO have been destroyed. Due to these efforts, much of the land has been transformed for productive use. Over 69,000 square meters are under cultivation for crops including cashews, beans and manioc. Homes being built, schools are being rehabilitated and there is access once again to major industries such as the Guinea-Telecom Center.

**Jordan**

Since 1997, Jordan has proudly established an effective national mine action program, which has resulted in significant lowering of casualties. As present, Jordan is conducting technical surveys of minefields along the Syrian border. As of January 2003, Jordan’s Royal Corps of Engineers had cleared 86,123 landmines from about 200 minefields, restoring more than 3,064 acres of land to safe use.

**Laos**

U.S. Special Operations Forces soldiers have trained more than 1,200 Laotians, creating an indigenous capability to clear UXO and also the ability to train additional clearance technicians. Personnel at UNO LAO (the Laotian National UXO Project) have destroyed more than 363,000 pieces of UXO, and cleared more than 32,700,000 square meters of land, which now has been restored to productive agricultural use. UXO LAO personnel have also conducted mine/UXO awareness visits in more than 2,400 villages. More than 300 Laotian medical staff members have received training in emergency rehabilitation or laboratory services.

**Latin America**

Costa Rica already has declared itself “mine safe.” Three additional Central American countries—Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua—are nearing that plateau. To date, in Nicaragua, approximately 26,240 landmines have been found and destroyed by Nicaraguan deminers, allowing the government to declare 24 Nicaraguan municipalities and 168 kilometers of international border mine safe. In total, approximately 1.9 million square meters of land have been cleared in Nicaragua. Costa Rican deminers cleared 100,000 square meters of land. Honduras and Guatemalan are expected to declare themselves mine safe within 12 to 18 months.

**Mozambique**

Since 1992, mine clearance personnel from NGOs and the Mozambican military have removed more than 17,000 landmines and 29,000 pieces of UXO, and opened more than 4,500 kilometers of roads, facilitating post-war movements of agricultural land and reconnecting nearly one million people with their local economies. Demining operations have also played a vital role in Mozambique's overall development strategy. For example, the Masingir Dam project will supply electricity and irrigation to approximately nine million square meters of land, and mines and thousands of pieces of UXO. Landmines and UXO fatalities dropped from 108 in 1994 to three in 2000. Some 400,000 refugees and 200,000 IDPs have returned to their villages.

**Conclusion**

The United States’ assistance, and that of other like-minded donors, has led to some impressive results throughout the world. Many countries are at or near sustainment, able to remove landmines on their own. Working in partnership with other donors and international organizations, the U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action Program’s efforts will allow the citizens of many mine-affected countries to once again walk the earth in safety.

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**United States Humanitarian Mine Action Program**

- A CRDF deminer providing the land.

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