

Adopt-A-Team: Adopt-A-Minefield® Responds to the Situation in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is considered one of the most mine-affected countries in the world. This is the sad legacy of 23 years of near-continuous war—first against Soviet occupiers, then between rival Afghan factions. The majority of the population has not experienced a time of peace in their lives. According to the United Nations, between 150 and 300 people are injured or killed every month due to landmines or UXO. Seventy percent of those accidents involve civilians—many of whom are returning refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs).

by Megan Burke, *Adopt-A-Minefield*

Introduction

News from Afghanistan since January of this year has underscored the threat of landmines—both for the Afghan people and the 8,000 U.S. troops who are currently stationed there. On January

10th, an American soldier was airlifted to Germany after stepping on a landmine at an airbase north of Kabul. An incident on February 1st killed four Afghan soldiers after they drove over an anti-tank mine. Most recently, on February 19th, two U.S. soldiers in eastern Afghanistan were injured while patrolling the city of Gardez. One soldier lost his foot and the other suffered facial injuries.

The Adopt-A-Minefield® (AAM) Campaign of the United Nations Association of the USA (UNA-USA) began raising funds to support mine clearance in Afghanistan, working in partnership with the United Nations Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan (MAPA) in 1999. For the first two years, AAM raised funds through the “Adopt-A-Minefield” model, encouraging local grassroots organizations to “adopt” a specific mined area by raising the \$25,000 (U.S.) to \$30,000 needed on average to clear the area of landmines.

Within days of September 11, 2001, the situation in Afghanistan changed dramatically. International staff working for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations were

ordered to leave the country in anticipation of military strikes and as a precaution for the inevitable erosion of security. A week after the attacks, the United Nations announced the temporary suspension of the demining industry. Nearly all the Afghan deminers left their mine detectors and prodders and returned to their families in Pakistan.

At the same time, the threat of coalition strikes and the delivery of food by air created a massive population movement, increasing the risk of mine casualties. Many people fled to Pakistan and those still within Afghanistan put their lives at risk by unknowingly entering minefields in search of food. This movement of people has continued through 2002 and into 2003 as refugees have begun to flood back into the country and IDPs have started to return to their homes. The United Nations estimates that about 100,000 people are on the move and about 25,000 of the homes they are returning to are contaminated by explosives.

AAM suspended its operations in the country following the United Nations’ temporary suspension. Within a short time, the United Nations resumed demining work with a radically different set of priorities. Demining teams set new priorities focused on emergency clearance, which included removing cluster munitions (the small bomblets within cluster bombs) as well as continuing their work of removing the pre-existing threat of landmines. The work was never-ending for the small teams deployed in response to villages affected by unexploded cluster bomblets and mine accidents often relayed by word of mouth or through simple radio. Deminers who were part of these emergency response teams recall the period vividly. “We just had no support, no help from anyone,” states Malang Khawan, the team leader of the Organization for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation’s (OMAR’s) Team B. For weeks, Malang and members of his team responded to accidents, in some cases arriving too late to do anything.

The Launch of Adopt-A-Team

In October of 2001, AAM saw a steady increase in public interest towards

contributing to the program in Afghanistan following intense media coverage and the potential threat of landmines to coalition forces. Our sponsors wanted to find a way to help. We began to speak with our UN partners in Afghanistan to determine how AAM sponsors could make a substantial contribution towards emergency demining operations. Former Program Coordinator Erin Snider traveled to Afghanistan to meet with MAPA to devise a new model—one that could provide funds quickly and flexibly. Erin traveled throughout Afghanistan meeting with demining teams and understanding what they needed in order to get the job done. She says that her time spent with deminers in Kabul, Jalalabad and Herat was the most memorable and inspiring part of her visit. Since the end of the Soviet occupation, deminers have worked tirelessly to remove the seven to eight million mines infesting their country. With the new challenges in Afghanistan, supporting the work of these men has never been more urgent.

In the spring of 2002, AAM launched the Adopt-A-Team emergency response program in Afghanistan. Through Adopt-A-Team, donors sponsor the work of manual clearance teams for about \$30,000 or make smaller donations towards their general operations. This approach allows deminers to respond to emergencies as they occur; this gives them the flexibility they need now more than ever. For each period of sponsorship, AAM sends donors a report from its UN partners in the field outlining the team’s activities.

Since launching the program less than a year ago, AAM has raised nearly \$900,000. Adoptors have included a wide variety of individuals, including UNA members, school groups, interested individuals and participants in a special fundraiser hosted by Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones last spring. People have recognized the urgency of the situation and have given what they can to prevent human suffering and help get Afghanistan back on the path to reconstruction.

The Teams

AAM is currently working with six teams from the following four Afghan organizations who all work in cooperation

with MAPA: OMAR, the Demining Agency for Afghanistan (DAFA), Afghan Technical Consultants (ATC) and the Mine Dog Detection Center (MDC). The first three organizations have manual demining teams that consist of 32 team members, including medical field personnel. Teams from MDC work with mine detection dogs (MDDs)—usually four per team—alongside 12 deminers and eight other staff. Deminers in Afghanistan, as in anywhere in the world, have a dangerous and stressful occupation.

The work is long and tedious—manual demining teams meticulously examine inch by inch to check for mines or UXO. The routine is simple and is repeated hundreds of times a day. In addition to the stress of work, most Afghan deminers are separated from their families for two months at a time and are only able to stay with them for 10 days at a time before returning to work. Despite all of this, the commitment of these deminers is unwavering. While in Afghanistan, Erin interviewed one deminer who spoke with passion and conviction when he said that “working here is the most honorable thing I can do for my people and my country.”

Manual Demining

The predominant method of detecting and destroying mines in Afghanistan is manual mine clearance. While this method is slow, labor-intensive and often dangerous to deminers, it is the most reliable way to meet humanitarian mine clearance standards. It is estimated that within Afghanistan, 2,000 deminers can manually clear 10 to 15 square kilometers of land per year.

Manual deminers work primarily with metal detectors and prodders to detect mines. While metal detectors are able to identify most mines, they do not work well in soil with a high metal content. In these areas, metal detectors create many false alarms, forcing manual deminers to act on each signal as if it were a landmine. In Afghanistan, metal is everywhere. More than 20 years of conflict have left more than just mines and UXO in Afghanistan’s soil. Spent shells, bullet casings, and other bits of metal make up the strange archaeology of war, which makes demining

there more complex than in some other mine-affected countries.

It is now possible to manufacture landmines with a metal content low enough to go unrecognized by metal detectors, which further complicates the demining process. Despite these difficulties, manual demining remains the most effective demining technique available. This is the method used by most of the teams supported through Adopt-A-Team: the teams of ATC, OMAR and DAFA. While deminers in Afghanistan undergo extensive training, only a flak jacket, a helmet and patience protect them from an accident.

Demining Organizations

ATC, founded in 1989 by Kefayatullah Eblagh, its present director, is one of the largest and leading mine clearance organizations currently operating in Afghanistan. ATC began with only one 24-man team and 11 administrative and support staff to clear mines and UXO from high-priority areas. Within one year, ATC expanded to include 750 additional staff. ATC has continued to grow since then, and now employs nearly 1,300 Afghans. Teams #7 and #21, both "Adopt-A-Team" teams, received special training in the fall of 2001 to recognize and remove cluster

bomblets that were deployed during coalition air strikes. These teams are mainly working around Kabul and Jalalabad.

OMAR was founded in 1990 and has since been a leading organization for mine clearance and mine awareness in Afghanistan. While OMAR's mine clearance operations initially began in the western provinces of Afghanistan, operations have since been expanded to the southern and central regions of the country. Since 1992, OMAR has cleared over 18 million square meters of agricultural and grazing land, roads, irrigation channels and housing areas. Their efforts have resulted in the destruction of 888 anti-tank mines; 29,434 anti-personnel landmines; 24,307 pieces of UXO; and 10,545,904 fragments. An additional 7,029,414 square meters of battle area were also cleared.

The members of OMAR Team B, available through Adopt-A-Team, have been together for nine years. Since 1993, the 32 deminers of Team B have been demining mine-affected regions throughout the western provinces of Afghanistan. Most of the deminers worked in the army or were students before becoming deminers. Most of them support families of five or more living in Pakistan—a journey often taking several days from western Afghanistan. The

urgency of demining in the west became more amplified after September 11, 2001. OMAR Team B has changed its work plans to respond to emergency mine clearance needs such as UXO and cluster munitions remaining from coalition strikes in the country. The main priorities include areas that are critical to the return of refugees and IDPs and agricultural land essential for reconstructing Afghanistan's economic base.

DAFA was founded in June 1990 to implement United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) demining projects in the southwestern provinces of Afghanistan. DAFA's work is focused on demining throughout the southern region of Afghanistan. Most of their work is carried out in the provinces of Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul. The majority of DAFA's resources are deployed in the high-priority areas surrounding the city of Kandahar. DAFA operations are carried out through six site offices deploying 12 manual clearance teams throughout the region.

DAFA team #3, the AAM team, has been focusing on removing the threat of landmines and cluster bombs for residents of the southern provinces. This team has 24 manual deminers, the majority with 10 or more years of demining experience, plus various support staff and field paramedics.

Mine Detection Dogs

MDDs are an important component of humanitarian mine clearance operations because, once trained, they can smell the explosives in a mine. This enables them to detect mines with low metal content that cannot be found with metal detectors. MDDs are also particularly well-suited for the initial surveys used to establish which parts of a suspected area are mine-free and which are contaminated. This allows deminers to reduce the areas that must be checked manually. Dogs can work in almost all types of terrain but work especially well on the less vegetated land that is found in many parts of Afghanistan. MDDs are highly reliable and can clear land between five and 10 times faster than manual deminers alone.

Currently, Adopt-A-Team is supporting two MDC teams—#5 and

#6—and we will soon be adding three more. MDC was founded in 1989 to address the problem of mines and UXO and return mine-free land to the people of Afghanistan. MDC was established with financial support from the U.S. government; since 1995, the program has been receiving financial support from the German government and UNOCHA.

By using dogs trained to detect mines, MDC aims to provide a safe, quick and economically viable method of mine clearance that will ultimately enable Afghans to reconstruct and develop Afghanistan. MDC has one of the highest mine clearance ratios in Afghanistan. By using dogs in clearance operations, MDC has been effective in clearing roads, agricultural and grazing land, and residential areas throughout 14 provinces in Afghanistan. The average clearance rate of a mine dog group (MDG) is 4,000–5,000 square meters per day. The accident ratio is also significantly lower than that experienced by manual teams.

The men of MDC Team #5 and #6 have been together since 1994. The deminers come from diverse backgrounds: former members of the mujahedin, students, clerks, teachers and shopkeepers now all count themselves as deminers with MDC. Both teams use dogs as part of their operations, and they play an integral role in the demining process. Deminers from MDC work and train closely with their dogs, ultimately forming a strong bond between deminer and dog—a reality that prompts many MDC deminers to joke that they prefer to work with dogs rather than people.

The Benefits of Adopt-A-Team

The Adopt-A-Team program fills an important niche within mine action in Afghanistan. It provides additional and badly needed funds to the field so that Afghan deminers can work where they are needed, when they are needed. They can clear roads for returning refugees, make homes safe and also begin the critical work of clearing the land that will allow Afghanistan to rebuild its devastated economy. In addition, it provides jobs to nearly 200 deminers—many of whom

provide food and money to an extended family of 20 or more people. Finally, it allows the United Nations to increase its demining capacity and thus the rate at which it can clear the highest-priority sites. The situation in Afghanistan is grave, but it is not without hope—the United Nations has a new intensive strategy that aims to clear all high-impact areas within five years. This is only possible with sustained donor support from governments as well as the efforts of individuals through AAM. Through efforts such as AAM's Adopt-A-Team, the threat of landmines in Afghanistan can be

solved not just in our lifetime, but before 2010. ■

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