

HUMAID's Demining Efforts in Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau may not have one of the largest landmine problems in the world, but the lives of native Guineans continue to be threatened on a daily basis by landmines/UXO that remain from previous conflicts. This article highlights the efforts of the non-governmental organization (NGO) HUMAID, whose main objective is to keep working until Guinea-Bissau is landmine-free.



■ HUMAID deminers by a dugout from which they trigger the explosion to destroy UXO. This is located about 500 meters from ground zero, ie, the site of the explosion.
c/o HUMAID

by Susanna Sprinkel, MAIC

Introduction

A farmer protecting his cattle from thieves places leftover landmines around his corral, removing them each morning and replacing them each evening. A woman hangs her clothes to dry on 30 m of detonating cord she found on the ground. A young child runs with his friends, throwing the mine he's been playing with against a nearby tree. Fortunately, no one but the tree was injured in these incidences, but these are the misfortunes HUMAID is working to prevent in Guinea-Bissau, a country where civilians seem to have little knowledge of the extreme danger landmines pose.

Two years of civil war in 1998 left nearly 6,000 landmines in Guinea-Bissau's capital,

Bissau. An estimated additional 4,000 mines were planted in four areas in the south of the country. (These estimates do not include landmines and UXO leftover from the War for Independence that ended in 1974.) Once the civil war was resolved in 1999, a group of seven military veterans trained in demining methods decided to form HUMAID, under the incentive and direction of Canadian Elaine Grimson. When Grimson passed away later that year, former American Ambassador to Guinea-Bissau John Blacken was encouraged to take over her role as Administrator to HUMAID.

Getting Started

Upon taking on the administrative position at HUMAID, Blacken determined that the best way to receive donor sponsorship was to prove they could get the job done. Working with Blacken's pickup truck and personal funds, the group set out to identify and mark mine-affected areas and to begin removing UXO in Bissau. By the time they received their first donation from the British government in May of 2000, HUMAID had removed 165 UXO and marked all minefields in Bissau, including four additional minefields south of the city.

With this grant from the British government, the NGO was able to recruit and train 25 more deminers as well as purchase additional personal protective equipment (PPE). These funds lasted only a month and a half, but the core group of HUMAID personnel was not discouraged and continued removing UXO from the city. They used radio broadcasts to advise civilians in Bissau to notify HUMAID of any known

munitions in the area and were able to remove 508 UXO by November. Over the following year, HUMAID began securing a number of grants from the American, French, German and Swedish governments.

Until December 2002, HUMAID was the only organization to conduct mine/UXO clearance operations in Guinea-Bissau. However, a National Demining Commission for the country was established in 2001. During the next year, they formed the NGO LUTCOM, funded by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). LUTCOM and HUMAID have been collaborating on minefield clearance projects since December 2002.

Threat to Civilians

During the civil war, many natives of Bissau and surrounding areas fled their homes, returning to front- and backyards infested with landmines and UXO. Throughout their operations, HUMAID has found that a number of civilians have been storing these munitions in their homes, unaware of how dangerous they truly are. Additionally, three teenage girls were killed when, in the mistaken belief that Howitzer warheads contain gunpowder, they tried to break open the warhead to obtain gunpowder for New Year's fireworks. As long as these landmines and UXO remain in the ground, they continue to pose an imminent threat to civilians.

Noteworthy Accomplishments

Since HUMAID's development in 1999, it has grown to a group of 64 personnel. During this time, the workers have undergone repeated training courses, and they have obtained the mine detecting equipment, vehicles and PPE necessary to keep the team going. HUMAID's first

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priorities were residential areas where mines were laid directly beside residences. Now that those areas are cleared, they can move on to less populated regions. By mid-2003, HUMAID expects to finish demining in the capital city and begin mine clearance in the interior of the country.

Over the past two years, using mostly manual demining techniques, HUMAID deminers have cleared 299,033 sq m of land, removing a total of 18,415 explosives (2,420 AP mines, 65 AT mines, 182 anti-boat (AB) mines and 15,748 UXO). Additionally, upon request of the Guinean government, HUMAID has destroyed a total of 16,408 explosives (2,778 AP

mines, 104 AT mines, 182 AB mines and 13,377 UXO) and removed 8,565 kg of metal from the ground.

Conclusion

Setting the way for mine/UXO clearance operations in Guinea-Bissau, HUMAID has made a remarkable difference in the lives of native Guineans. Provided that they are able to receive the necessary funding, HUMAID hopes to declare the country landmine free by the end of 2004. Either way, this team doesn't plan to stop until the job is done. ■

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