They Started With a Temple: JAHDS in Thailand

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International Mine Action

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They Started With A Temple: JAHDS in Thailand

The Japanese Alliance for Humanitarian Demining Support (JAHDS), better known for its research and development of Ground Penetrating Radar (Mine Eye), recently became involved in mine clearance. In the process of testing mine clearance equipment, JAHDS cleared an area around an ancient Khmer temple.

by Paddy Blagden, Former Technical Director of GICHD

JAHDS is better known for research and development of Mine Eye and for supporting the demining efforts of other organizations, rather than for mine clearance. The need to test Mine Eye under operational conditions called for the creation of a test field with access to live mines. It follows that if you have a field with live mines, you might as well clear them.

The decision to step into the mine clearance arena was taken lightly. JAHDS had been testing equipment in Thailand for some time, with the full co-operation of the Thailand Mine Action Centre (TMAC). It had also formed a working relationship with the General Charitunn Chaisukhanvan Foundation (GCCF), a Thai NGO based in Bangkok, and the Thai Army, which had a Humanitarian Mine Action Unit (HMAU) working in the northeast of the country.

JAHDS appointed Mr. Wutara Sugaya, an ex-manner, as the project manager. JAHDS also needed an international specialist to provide the field operational skills. They chose a South African, Johan van Zyl, to be the Operations Manager. Zyl is a man of vast experience who is well known in the mine clearance world. They were ready to begin.

Obviously, you cannot start demining without a minefield. The project chosen was the area around the ancient Khmer temple of Sadok Khle Thom, close to the Thai-Cambodia border, north of the small border town of Aranyaprathet in Surin Province. This temple is one of a network of Khmer temples, built about 1100 years ago, with the famous Cambodian temple complex of Angkor in its centre. The Khmer Rouge, and other warring factions, may have mined the temple grounds as part of the border mindfields. Clearance of the temple itself was needed to permit the promotion of increased tourism in the area and to provide access to land for local farming.

The site was relatively small—about 340,000 square metres in all—but presented a range of problems, with vegetation varying from a flat grassy area to densely vegetated sections with large trees. The area was seen as a good site to build up experience. Thus, JAHDS started with a temple.

Starting from nothing is difficult and demands patience, determination and good planning. The JAHDS team started by setting up a working partnership with HMAU 1 and began the refresher training of the GCCF deminers. The area chosen was perfect for such training—a low-threat area, with medium vegetation, but well suited to a systems approach, using machines, manual clearance and dogs. As confidence and experience increased, more GCCF deminers were recruited, and HMAU 1 was able to loan a BD9/86 brush cutter and dog teams, and to carry out some of the Quality Assurance. They also allowed JAHDS to use a Tempest Mk 4 and a Pearson SDT (Survivable Demining Tractor and Tools), a highly versatile and effective machine. A JAHDS-owned Hitachi brush cutter augmented those machines.

Thanks to the help of its working partners, the JAHDS programme is now well under way. Over the next sections of land have been formally handed back to the District, and are even now being cultivated. The work being done will be available for inspection by those attending the Fifth Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty. It appears JAHDS will meet its target completion date of October 2003. Life has always been “interesting” (remember the Chinese proverbs) for the clearance community, but even so never dull. The site was even visited by beautiful contesmen for the “Miss Thailand” competition. No group of deminers has ever concentrated quite so hard.

For the future, there are other challenges in the border area, and even over the border in Cambodia, but JAHDS will never forget that they started with a temple.

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more

by Paul Ellis, GICHD

The aim of the current series of meetings is to discuss possible measures that could alleviate the humanitarian impact of ERW. Based on earlier work, the ambassador from the Netherlands, who is responsible for coordinating work on ERW in the CCW, presented a paper as a possible basis for an instrument or protocol on ERW. At present, there are two arguments as to how on work this paper should progress. The majority of States Parties favour the adoption of a legally binding protocol. 1 However, some States Parties continue to oppose this view, favouring a “statement of best practices.” For the clearance community, the encouraging news is that issues that are central to their work in the field [such as responsibility for clearing up ERW and measures to protect civilians, e.g. fencing and marking] are being discussed in an international forum. These discussions may result in formal obligations for parties to future conflicts to provide clearance and other mine action activities.

After two weeks of discussions, the Coordinator for ERW will now reduct the proposal and present it again to States Parties in the autumn with the next formal meeting scheduled for November 2003. The key articles of interest to the clearance community are Article 3: Clearance, Removal and Destruction of Explosive Remnants of War, Article 4: Recording and Use of Information; Article 5: Provisions for the Protection of the Civilian Populations from the Effects of Explosive Remnants of War; Article 7: Existing Explosive Remnants of War; and the Technical Annex, which covers recording and provision of information on UXO and abandoned ordnance plus risk education and the provision of information.

The Draft for an Instrument on ERW

From a positive perspective, the draft paper offers the prospect of recognizing the responsibility of parties to a conflict to clean up ERW, which could mean better funding provision, swifter action and the way the outbreak of conflict will be dealt with ERW and improved co-operation between military forces and humanitarian organisations. Also, information would be made available, such as the types of ordnance used, location of battle areas, methods for safe disposal, presence of anti-handling devices, and location and amounts of abandoned ammunition. All this information would be of considerable use for pre-deployment planning and preparation for a post-conflict environment. However, the proposals could see states increasingly using their own assets (almost certainly the military) to undertake work previously done by the clearance community. This raises issues about the quality and efficacy of the military in this type of work. Furthermore, if states use their own assets to clear ERW or provide risk education, they might have to pay a third party to do what they see as a duplication of work.

As a result, there could potentially be a negative impact on funding.

Before there will be any agreement, there are a number of obstacles that we need to overcome. First, among many delegations, there is still a lack of understanding about the reality of work in the field or what is involved in providing risk education. The few “experts” that states bring along are almost always military officers, and not always with experience in explosive ordnance disposal (EOD). Let alone a mine action programme. Several states are openly opposed to providing any information beyond the bare minimum.

The usual reason cited for this is national security. The GICHD and others have pointed out that the issue is not one of providing the information but rather of when the information becomes known. A good example would be, should states refuse to provide coordinates for cluster bomb strikes, it just means that the clearance community would have to establish the location using a survey.

The information ultimately becomes known—it just takes longer and costs more. There are also grounds for concern about how information would be provided. The draft proposal mentioned international databases, perhaps run by the United Nations.

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