Myths, Mines and Ground Clearance

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Building on an article published in issue 2.3 of this Journal, the author discusses some of the prevailing myths that beset the humanitarian demining (HD) industry and which he believes restrict its progress. Intended as a discussion prompt, some of the points he makes may be contentious.

by Andy Smith, AVS Mine Action Consultants

In 1998, I wrote an article for this journal about common myths in mine clearance. Since that time, I have received many messages supporting what I wrote, and none taking the opposing view. The last of these messages was received just a couple of months ago — showing that the online back issues of this journal are still being used. It may be useful for you to read over that article before arguing strongly against anything in this article (see http://avas.jmu.edu/journal/2.3/features/myths.htm).

Looking over the original article, I would change a few lines and alter the areas here and there, but I believe that the list remains a relevant record of unhelpful myths.

A few have been partly addressed, then forgotten. For example, the development of the new International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) was based on an acceptance that it was not up to the West to dictate details of operation to National Authorities. This was largely responsible for the relative success of these standards, but may be being forgotten as more standards are added and the original User Focus Group is marginalised.

A few have become more complicated. For example, the use of modern munitions that act as mines but are not designed as mines complicates the question of whether mine use is really in decline in some areas.

Critics often present the "man with a pro" as an unprofessional caveman technology. In fact, it is more sophisticated than any artificial device yet available. No matter how many millions of dollars are thrown at robotics, it will be a very long time before machines equal the sophisticated array of data gathering and processing equipment that a human can be.

"If we can send men to the moon, we must be able to do a man with a pro!"

The truth is that as long as conflicts continue, victim-initiated devices (mines) of one kind or another will be used. Whether they are buried as booby traps or do not even have the legs to stand upright anymore, landmines are falling. Bur the use of increasingly indiscriminate weapon systems is increasing.

"You can meet deminers and find out about demining at conferences."

I define a "humanitarian deminer" as someone whose principal day-to-day activity involves using his/her eyes, dogs, metal detectors, prodders or other means to physically clear areas believed to be mined. These are almost invariably local people. A deminer is not someone you will meet at a conference or someone who is paid a Western salary. Those people may be Demining Managers and Technical Advisors, but they do not actually clear mines themselves. I can think of only a handful of ex-par who regularly demine areas. A deminer is not someone you can send to a Booster camp and expect to learn what they need to know. The ex-par can be Demining Managers and Technical Advisors, but the "man with a pro" is a specialist.

"More mines are being laid than cleared today."

While still quoted by the general public, I hear this argument less often than in former years—which is ironic because there is more truth in it now than there was five years ago. In conflict areas (Chechnya, Iraq, for example), more mines have been placed than cleared in the last year. But in those post-conflict areas that have a mature mine action programme (Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Croatia, Kosovo, Kurdistan, Iraq, Russia-Hercegovina, Mozambique, etc.), the claim is simply untrue. Sustained demining efforts have cleared vast areas of land without any significant replacement of mines and ordnance. The process has supported the establishment of stability in many ways and has been an essential part of internationally supported efforts to break cycles of violence.

"Mines have no place in modern warfare."

The truth is that as long as conflicts continue, victim-initiated devices (mines) of one kind or another will be used. "Western" leadership is "incompetent" and "obeys the rules".

"Mines are the greatest killers in post-conflict regions."

In some areas, this is true. In many areas, it is the other detractors of war that claims the most lives. The truth is that, after a conflict is over and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to the home areas, the armaments left over after conflict are often the greatest killers of civilians. Since I wrote last, the term "explosive remnants of war (ERW)" seems to have reversed the success of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). So, at the start of the new millennium, numbers of anti-personnel landmines are falling. But the use of increasingly indiscriminate weapon systems is increasing.

"Demining is a specialist activity that takes a long time to learn."

In almost all countries with an active HD sector, most field deminers are relatively uneducated local men. They may have a military background, but this background will not have involved any in-depth training in mine detection and removal. Some organisations have new deminers working in a live area within 10 days of starting their training. These deminers will work alongside a more experienced petrol for further "on-the-job" training. This system works, and from the available information, it looks as if the highest risk time among deminers is not their first week or even their first year of work. The truth is that while demining is a specialist activity, it does not take long to learn.

"The rules of HD must be set by Western specialists."

When I wrote on this last time, the United Nations' published rules were widely ignored even in programmes under the control of the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS). Companies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) made up their own rules, often in competition with each other, so best practices were not shared.

With the development of improved IMAS, this situation has changed for the better. Based on widespread consultation and flexibility, the current IMAS are far more useful than their predecessors. They are being widely adopted by individual groups and National Authorities around the world. Even military demining efforts are increasingly using the IMAS as a starting point, although a few of the oldest demining organisations hold out and insist on doing things as they have always done.

Rules have changed under the leadership of Western specialists, people who took great pains to achieve widespread practicality. They led the process, and they convinced their predecessors and non-governments that it is in the real world to dictate the detail. This was a major achievement, and the inclusion of provisions to update the standards regularly was a real break-through. But the organisation that achieved this was new and dynamic at that time. Today it seems to be falling into the neglect because of the necessity of its predecessors and spending a great deal of effort justifying its own existence rather than serving the community. A lesson learned has been rapidly forgotten.
The main advantages of de-mining groups widely used. Sophisticated items such as made tools and equipment exist and are business, so no one should expect it speed can compromise the humanitarian issue. More than 20 commercial IOD companies still operate in Germany, and thousands of tons of WWII ordnance are known to still litter old battle areas in Belgium and France. What is necessary is to establish a sustainable de-mining capacity—because some clearances can directly responsible for a limb lost. It is frequently argued that "area reduction" need not be as thorough as clearance—so it should be acceptable to use methods that are known to be inefficient. Fails and one or other roller systems are favourites—many of which are known to be very inefficient or dehumanizing pressure, and devices all of which leave UXO intact. The advocates of these machines conveniently ignore the fact that UXO causes as many civilian injuries as mines in many countries. The local people watch the impressive machine work and believe that the "reduced" area is actually a "safe" area, so the distinction between "area reduction" and "area clearance" is lost on them. They enter an unsafe area with false confidence. Perhaps the reason that people make these arguments is a desire to find a use for the machines—developed with millions of dollars of research money but never able to achieve the clearance levels of manual deminers. Another reason is the perceived need to increase the speed of clearance by using manual deminers. The truth is that it is better to mark a dangerous area clearly and leave it until later than to release a dangerous area for use.

"Demining is too slow." It is frequently argued that this obvious fact that we are just not working fast enough—and that this justifies spending huge amounts of money trying to develop a faster way of clearing the ground than by using manual deminers. But manual demining is not necessarily to lack of funding but sometimes due to inefficient management. In many areas, it is remarkably thorough and fast, using manual deminers assisted by machines and dogs. Experience in Europe proves evidence that speed of clearance is not really the issue. More than 20 commercial IOD companies still operate in Germany, and thousands of tons of WWII ordnance are known to still litter old battle areas in Belgium and France. What is necessary is to establish a sustainable de-mining capacity—because some clearances can directly responsible for a limb lost. It is frequently argued that "area reduction" need not be as thorough as clearance—so it should be acceptable to use methods that are known to be inefficient. Fails and one or other roller systems are favourites—many of which are known to be very inefficient or dehumanizing pressure, and devices all of which leave UXO intact. The advocates of these machines conveniently ignore the fact that UXO causes as many civilian injuries as mines in many countries. The local people watch the impressive machine work and believe that the "reduced" area is actually a "safe" area, so the distinction between "area reduction" and "area clearance" is lost on them. They enter an unsafe area with false confidence. Perhaps the reason that people make these arguments is a desire to find a use for the machines—developed with millions of dollars of research money but never able to achieve the clearance levels of manual deminers. Another reason is the perceived need to increase the speed of clearance by using manual deminers. The truth is that it is better to mark a dangerous area clearly and leave it until later than to release a dangerous area for use.

"A mine cleared is a limb saved." It is often said that "every mine cleared is a life or limb saved," a statement linked to the notion that "demining is so slow that it makes sense to speed it up by reducing the quality of the clearance." The truth is that incomplete clearance of an area can lead to local people believing the area is safe—and so starting to use it again. Their risk of injury actually increases because some of the devices were cleared. In this case, a mine cleared can directly responsible for a limb lost. It is frequently argued that "area reduction" need not be as thorough as clearance—so it should be acceptable to use methods that are known to be inefficient. Fails and one or other roller systems are favourites—many of which are known to be very inefficient or dehumanizing pressure, and devices all of which leave UXO intact. The advocates of these machines conveniently ignore the fact that UXO causes as many civilian injuries as mines in many countries. The local people watch the impressive machine work and believe that the "reduced" area is actually a "safe" area, so the distinction between "area reduction" and "area clearance" is lost on them. They enter an unsafe area with false confidence. Perhaps the reason that people make these arguments is a desire to find a use for the machines—developed with millions of dollars of research money but never able to achieve the clearance levels of manual deminers. Another reason is the perceived need to increase the speed of clearance by using manual deminers. The truth is that it is better to mark a dangerous area clearly and leave it until later than to release a dangerous area for use.

"Locally made mining equipment is always of a poor quality." This is often a clear assumption behind the attitude of equipment purchasers. It is an attitude fostered by Western suppliers of equipment who prefer everyone to source through them. The de-mining supply industry is a sophisticated, hard-sell extension of the arms supply business, so no one should expect it to put sustainable solutions in major aims. The main advantages of de-mining groups having their equipment supplied from local sources are low-cost, ready availability and easy maintenance.

The truth is that adequate, locally made tools and equipment exist and are widely used. Sophisticated items such as blast-visions, body armour and blast-resistance hand-tools are also made and supplied regionally in Asia and Africa.

We need to spend millions of dollars and use our best brains and facilities to develop new equipment for demining. Since 1994, I have still only seen a few areas of major change in the equipment used on the ground. These are in manual deminer footing, protection, metal detectors and mechanical assistance. None of the recent changes are the direct result of any new expenditure on Western research and development (R&D), although a few have capitalised on field-led breakthroughs. Reasons for this failure of R&D effort range from confused design criteria (insisting military needs with those of HD) to plain ignorance of the problems in the field. In many cases, the inappropriateness of the design has been made obvious early in development, but after the funds have been granted, the work must go on. Commercial equipment developers have struggled to understand field needs far more successfully. Examples include the new generation of ground-compensating metal detectors and the increased use of rubble mine-protected vehicles. Many field groups have adapted existing plant equipment to meet their mechanical-assistance needs. Ironically, when they have attracted R&D funding to do this, their output has been far less focused and cost-effective.

While it would be convenient if HD really did involve a known number of finite tasks that could be prioritised and finished with mechanical precision, past experiences show that this is just a pipe dream. If it is accepted that problems with EWR will remain for decades or even in the future, the need to develop a sustainable national capacity becomes paramount. This imperative makes HD completely away from the mechanistic in-and-out mindset of a military operation and into the field of "sustainable development." Many people recognise this, but the industry is still dominated by ex-military workers at all levels. The reason for this dominance is not that demining requires any military training or skills—especially not those of senior officers. I believe that the main reason is that HD was seen as a job opportunity for the many ex-officers who came into the job market after the end of the Cold War. They saw themselves as being "the right people at the right time." They may have been partly right, but a jobs-for-the-boys approach has ensured that they appoint each other in a cycle of well meaning but relative incompetence that has been impossible to break to date. There are a few notable exceptions—ex-military people who have set out to

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Your comments and arguments would be appreciated (see contact information below).

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