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MINE FREE Planet: A Sri Lankan Vision

One organisation is determined to make a difference in the lives of thousands living in mine-affected areas of Sri Lanka. Conservative estimates reveal the humanitarian demining work to be carried out in Sri Lanka will take between 10 and 15 years.¹ Although an official figure is yet to be confirmed, a recent report suggests an estimated 900,000 mines have been laid in Jaffna and Killinochchi districts alone.² This does not include UXO and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

by Michael Pickering, *Director of Administration & Logistics, MINE FREE Planet*

Introduction

MINE FREE Planet (MFP) is a Sri Lankan non-governmental organisation (NGO) whose main mission is to save lives and operate independently of any political, racial, military or commercial aims of any group (no easy task in Sri Lanka). It was founded by three young Sri Lankans who are no strangers to charitable work in Sri Lanka and India. Many foreign mine action NGOs have come to Sri Lanka's aid and are carrying out a noble service in the north and east; however, Chandran, Priyantha and Kusala saw the need to establish a sustainable local humanitarian mine action organisation to continue the work over a sustained period of time. While realising that initially some outside expertise would be needed, they saw the potential to develop local talent and experience in this field.



The Team

MFP's core group consists of 10 deminers, two team leaders (2nd in command) and an expatriate Senior Technical Advisor. Drawn from local ex-army engineering regiments, they have extensive local mine clearance knowledge and most have explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) qualifications. They are also aware of the many community-sensitive issues that are present in the former conflict areas.

Because it is a small group at present, MFP will concentrate on survey and EOD tasks. While the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been supportive of its efforts, MFP has yet to secure any major donations but is hopeful that donations will be forthcoming in the not-too-distant future. This will enable MFP to get their men on the ground and commence operational tasks. MFP will build its capacity by recruiting and training local communities in their areas of operation.

The struggle has not been easy, involving long hours and a huge drain on personal resources. It is not a project where you can cut corners, because so many lives are at risk. MFP personnel decided to aim for the highest possible operating and safety standards from the start. They have utilised the help and experience of a number of local and expatriate personnel to develop the standard operating procedures (SOPs) of MFP to international standards, while taking local conditions into account.

Being a lush green paradise makes manual demining an arduous task in Sri Lanka. As soon as the population moved away from areas of conflict, the vegetation moved in. A deminer may spend 80 percent of his time "gardening" and the remaining 20 percent on demining.

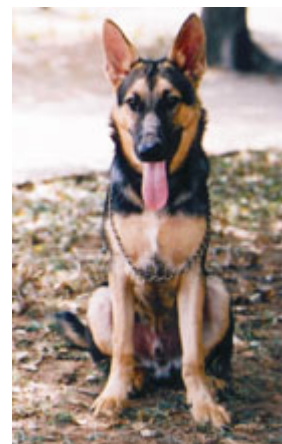
It is evident that brush-cutting or flail-type mechanised systems should be deployed in greater numbers than they are at present. This deployment would have a significant impact on increased productivity. The mechanized systems would have to be followed up by manual demining with possible support from mine detection dogs (MDDs). Anyone deploying one of these systems should take into account possible adverse effects on topsoil (i.e., destruction/compaction), which would defeat the purpose of returning land to internally displaced persons (IDPs) who would be unable to sustain an economic future for themselves and their families if the soil structure is incapable of supporting crops or grazing for cattle.



"Suspect" area in Sri Lanka. Note razor wire near bottom left of picture.

MDDs

MFP has embarked on an ambitious project to raise and train MDDs here in Sri Lanka. Many imported dogs suffer from the heat and humidity of Sri Lanka. Their working capacity is usually not more than 1.5–2 hours per day. So why not raise and train dogs from an early age to grow accustomed to local conditions? At present, the MFP staff has six young (six months old) purebred German Shepherds under professional obedience training. They intend to develop a training and assessment centre in Sri Lanka not only for their own dogs but also for other organisations who need it.



Timmy and Bruno, two young "hopefuls" in training with MFP.

The dogs' health and welfare are under the watchful eye of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. There are several nationally and internationally recognised researchers there. Professor Indira Silva (BVSc., PhD), one of the eminent vets and researchers in the country, and Dr. Ashoka Dangolla (BVSc., Dip. Vet. Epdi. PhD) have taken a keen personal interest in our project. The faculty members at Peradeniya are willing to offer their services to any organisation operating MDDs in Sri Lanka.



The team from the veterinary faculty give the dogs their regular check-up.



Catching a lift home after an evening session.



Clearing an area for MFP's MDD Training & Assessment Centre in Sigriya, Sri Lanka.

Socio-Economic Development

MFP also realises that removing landmines and UXO is not the final solution to the problem. Returnees must also have a sustainable economic future to return to. Many IDPs are from farming communities; to this end, MFP has "borrowed" the help of an external consultant to provide assistance, expertise and seed/plants to farming cooperatives with a buyback scheme on harvesting. MFP is hopeful that this project will also be implemented in the near future.

Victim Assistance

As with all mine-affected countries, landmines do not differentiate between combatants and civilians. MFP intends to assist landmine victims from all communities, as a future extension of its mine action activities.

Advocacy

As a local NGO, there seems to be little point in removing the threat if the ability to replace it still exists. Sri Lanka is still a state non-party to the Ottawa Convention. The government has shown a willingness to sign the treaty in the past. MFP will actively pursue advocating the ban of APMs in Sri Lanka to all conflicting parties.

Conclusion

The following are the goals we have set in order to achieve our vision of a mine-free Sri Lanka:

- To establish a sustainable Sri Lankan humanitarian mine action NGO
- To operate independently of the political, racial, military or commercial aims of any group
- To focus our main tasks on the removal of landmines and UXO in Sri Lanka with minimal ecological impact
- To build our capacity utilising local labour in mine-affected areas
- To facilitate the return of IDPs in Sri Lanka
- To assist in the rehabilitation and sustainable socio-economic development of mine-affected areas in Sri Lanka
- To assist the survivors and communities affected by landmines and UXO
- To advocate a ban of AP landmines in Sri Lanka

As with every programme, all of these initiatives cost time and money. MFP has approached the international community for donor assistance and is hopeful that funds will be procured in the near future. There is still a lot of opportunity for international and local businesses and societies to contribute to their cause while gaining tax benefits for their own organisations. Contributions could be in cash or in kind and may be sent directly to MFP or through the UNDP.

References

1. *Daily News* 23.06.03.
2. HALO Trust Sri Lanka Minefield Survey Report, Jan. 2003.

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