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Broadening Mine Action to Include Other Conventional Threats: The Formation of the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (WRA)

by Hayden Roberts, JMU, Frazure-Kreuzel-Drew Fellow

Introduction

The U.S. government has been a pioneer and dedicated supporter of humanitarian mine action since the first mine clearance programs began taking shape in Afghanistan in 1988. Through the investigation of new detection and clearance technologies, the development of indigenous mine action capacities and the formation of a wide array of public-private partnerships, the United States has demonstrated that its response to the persistent landmine problem remains a high priority. Innovative in the combined accomplishments of the U.S. government, the private sector, and other donor governments have been, they will, however, not provide a full response to the enormous tasks that remain. Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Jr., Special Representative of the President and Secretary of State for Mine Action and the Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military (PM) Affairs, recognizes this reality and has called for an aggressive international mine action agenda in the coming years. That task, however, has required the definition of "mine action" to be expanded to include remediation of abandoned munitions, and small arms and light weapons, with the aim of serving the broader objectives of post-conflict reconstruction and national reconciliation. As a result, the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement (WRA) within the Department of State's Bureau of PM Affairs was created to address these issues in a more synergistic manner.

Broadening the Impact of State Department Efforts

To accomplish Special Representative Bloomfield's vision, PM Affairs realigned the construction of the design and implementation of a new office integrating the functions of the Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs (HDP), the Office of Mine Action Initiatives and Partnerships (MAIP), and the Bureau of PM Affairs' Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Efforts to deal even more effectively with precursors to and after-effects of conflict. The establishment of this office is a bold new initiative that recognizes the common problem posed by landmines, UXO, stockpiled and abandoned ordnance (AO) and small arms/light weapons that threaten lives and limbs of civilians and military personnel, destabilize countries and entire regions, and impede efforts to rebuild war-torn societies.

The Realignment Process

After considering several options, it was decided that it would be best to design the new office in a way that offered an evolving approach that would leave room for change in the future. This option would have the new office oversee by Director, acting, Richard Kidd and broken down into three divisions supervised by Deputy Director James Lawrence (Deputy for Outreach and Public and Congressional Affairs), Deputy Director Col. Tom Seal, United States Marine Corps (Deputy of Programs) and Deputy Director Steve Costner (Deputy of Policy, Plans and Resource Management).

Realignment Functions and Relationships

The WRA (online at www.state.gov/rapid/pdf/wra.pdf) deals with countries using a more comprehensive approach. While each section will perform functions and tasks similar to what it did previously, the manner in which these tasks will be organized will depart from past practice. The functions of each unit are listed below:

Programs (Formerly Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs [PM/HDP])
- Represents the Department of State on the Interagency Policy Coordinating Committee.
- Conduct policy assessment visits.
- Carries our program management.
- Conducts policy, plans and resource management (Formerly SALW/PM).
- Acts as the interagency lead on the Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) unit or small arms/light weapons mitigation.
- Handles small arms/light weapons and landmine policy and program conferences, assessments and destruction.
- Tracks our program management.
- Nurtures international agreements.
- Represents U.S. government policy to foreign governments.

Outreach and Public and Congressional Affairs (Formerly MAIP)
- Fosters public-private partnerships to enhance mine action.
- Conducts public outreach to publicize and strengthen official mine action and small arms/light weapons mitigation.
- Strengthens international mine action institutions.
- Supports and international research and development (R&D) and testing and evaluation (T&E) for mine action technologies.

Conclusion

On September 19, 2003, a ceremony was held at the State Department to honor all those past and present, who have carried out the responsibilities of HDP, SALW/PM, and MAIP. The office became fully functional on Monday, September 22, 2003. The office will continue to provide U.S. humanitarian mine action assistance to nations affected by persistent landmines and UXO and pursue practical measures to reduce illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons. It will still develop public-private partnerships to support humanitarian mine action and also encourage new private initiatives to help mitigate threats from all weapons of localized destruction. Just as the United States has exercised leadership through its successful but separate humanitarian mine action program and small arms/light weapons (including efforts such as the Mine Action and Non-Proliferation Systems [MANPADS] stabilization efforts, this innovative new approach to small arms/light weapons and persistent landmines, combined with a useful program of action through the consolidated office, will be a model that we hope will be emulated by other nations, international organizations and NGOs.

References


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*All photos courtesy of the author.