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Bits and Bytes from Bogota

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The Americas: Regional Mine Action Seminar in Peru

During a two-day conference in Lima, Peru, participants reaffirmed their collective commitment and dedication to becoming a hemisphere safe from AP mines.

Some of the general topics of the two-day conference included:
- National planning and priority setting.
- The general status and operations of the Ottawa Convention in the Americas.
- The general status and operation of mine action programs in the Americas.
- National goals and progress made toward these goals.
- Regional Planning and Priority Setting.
- Possible methods to reinforce and strengthen the role of the OAS in mine action.
- Mobilizing political momentum and commitment.
- The OAS Portfolio as a mechanism for communicating short-term and regional cooperation.
- Resource mobilization.
- Building private/public partnerships in order to sustain resources for mine action.
- Mainstreaming mine action into national development initiatives.
- The importance of a National Spokesperson for each country in order to better engage the national authorities.

Conclusion
Closing remarks focused on developing an agreement of regional priorities and goals for 2004. The experience and expertise of each participant made the conference a success. The regional commitment of upholding the Ottawa Convention was reaffirmed and new goals were set to keep the region on the road to becoming a hemisphere safe from mines.

Data Collection and Use
Mine-affected countries in Latin America range from those still dealing with newly seeded landmines (e.g., Colombia) to those that are virtually mine-safe (e.g., Costa Rica), therefore one might suspect that there would be very little consensus about the subject of managing mine action related information. In fact, the countries of the region reached agreement on some valuable guidelines relating to this critical subject:
- As a start, identify what information is needed and how it will be used. This will result in collecting only need-to-know information and will result in a more streamlined methodology for collecting and using information. It also will not "burn out" the sources of direct, first-line information providers. It was observed that often too much information is collected that makes it or redundant pertinent information unusable. If preparation is made in defining needed information and the best methods for collecting and disseminating it, much work, which might have to be done later, could be eliminated "up front."
- Identify each agency or organization that has a valid interest in receiving landmine-related information. This will set the stage for productive quid pro quo relationship within the government and with coordinating organizations such as the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It may also create a demand for pertinent information, thus insuring its continued support within the government. It can help "shape" the way the data is collected and provided to others for the most convenient interpretation. The sharing of information will also facilitate mainstreaming of mine action activities within the broader context of social and economic development.
- Utilize many sources of data collection. Information systems can be more reliable when accumulated data is collected from a variety of sources. This not only provides a way to verify data, but can also provide data seen from various perspectives. Key sources of data are local newspaper articles, government agency reports, police and fire department reports, medical and hospital records, local government bodies, service clubs and organizations, schools, etc.
- Provide feedback to sources of data. Sometimes the sources of data will want to use the polished information that results from the raw data. Sometimes data sources would just like to know that their efforts were justified. Therefore, it is important to provide positive and constructive feedback to data sources about the worth and use of the data they provided.
- Create a centralized database that nevertheless depends on and serves decentralized modes. Most data collection schemes are based on collecting de-centralized data and then running that body into a centrally maintained, purified, and managed information system. It is important that the various groups (see first two points above) having need of information collected in the centralized system have access to portions of it that can further their goals. It is not necessary that all groups have access to all information, but it is necessary that legitimate uses of the information be given a way to gather use the information relevant to their missions and goals.
- Create a system that does not compromise basic secrecy, yet allows for the free flow of information. The information system must meet must. Little by little as the parameters for a systems study permit, users must be properly trained so that frustration and ignorance do not compromise the system, and so that within the system, only those with a need to know (both up and down the information "food chain") are granted access to sensitive information. There are two constituencies to be served by the data sources, those who must remain viable, and the users, who must be allowed access to pertinent information. This same type of balance is not easily to achieve, but becomes the basis for the best possible information management system. The United States would like to acknowledge the following persons for the insights provided during this workshop: Beatrice Elena Gutierrez-Burke, Jorge Capulion, Simon Berger, Nelson Castillo, Herminia Estrada Hernandez, Luis Suarez, Tony Hall, Maria Judith Paez Carmona and Suzanne Fiederlein.

Emergency Medical Treatment
Another topic that came a new twist to an "evergreen" mine action topic was emergency medical treatment to those suffering the tragedy of a landmine explosion. It was noted that most landmine accidents occur in rural areas where sophisticated medical treatment may not be available within the "golden hour"—the critical time period during which medical treatment is key to survival and minimizing damage.
Notes from the Director's Desk

Exacerbating the problem of dealing with the all-important time factor of medical trauma in isolated areas is the fact that the three patterns of landmine injuries are significantly different—and therefore treated differently—than conventional injuries due to traffic, agricultural, or work-related accidents. From cleaning the wound to applying tourniquets and facilitating the healing process, landmine wounds should be treated differently than other wounds. Also, it was observed that there is no such thing as a typical landmine injury: they can occur to any part of the body and in various patterns. In coming to grips with these problems, several suggestions were made:

- Stress a local integrated approach. This involves having local communities become aware of healthcare workers and their services, and bringing local medical workers to the attention of local caregivers and first responders. And, hopefully, it will result in a system in which local and rudimentary medical aid can be supplemented by access to more detailed information quickly accessed or delivered.
- Begin a training/medical career outreach program. Such a program would be, for a nominal amount of support costs, allow highly skilled physicians and surgeons to practice and teach in mine-affected areas for a limited time and develop a sustainable program whereby landmine-related medical practices could be taught and replicated if only on a very basic level.
- Initiate a telemedicine network. This proposal would begin by creating a "support group" that would allow area-based medical caregivers to make use of emergency procedures highlighted and carefully "scripted" for long-distance users and practitioners via the internet, telephone hook-ups or CD-ROMs.
- Create an integrated system to provide timely and appropriate emergency medical treatment. By incorporating the previous concepts into a "system," it may be possible to allow isolated communities or areas without sophisticated health care to "tap into" a system that provides access to best practices for providing timely and effective treatment to landmine accident victims. One might envision doctors under the auspices of NGO's training local medical caregivers and first responders in rudimentary concepts of mine action treatment. This might be done in conjunction with providing the community with a kit consisting of medical supplies and equipment designed to support such treatment, and it might also include a graphic-rich booklet of step-by-step procedures and checklists. Simultaneously, there might be a "hotline" established whereby local officials could quickly get in touch with pre-approved and available experts to call someone through an emergency medical procedure. A website or CD might also be the source of guidelines and photographs.

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Landmine News Around the World
The Wheelchair Foundation Distributes Over 5,000 Wheelchairs in Afghanistan

The Wheelchair Foundation, in association with the U.S. Department of State, recently distributed more than 5,000 wheelchairs to disabled Afghans, opening a project to help improve the lives of Afghan civilians affected by war. Wheelchair Foundation found that 75% of the donated wheelchairs went to Camp Wana and distributed them to Afghan citizens who were in need of medical treatment. The Wheelchair Foundation also commented on the distribution of the wheelchairs. The leaders of Afghanistan were still very concerned about the health of the civilians and the donors for the wheelchairs. Wheelchair Foundation also distributed wheelchairs to the Afghanistan Ministry of Health, which received more than 100,000 wheelchairs in 100 countries to victims of war, disability and disease. For more information, visit the Wheelchair Foundation website at http://www.wheelchairfoundation.org.

Rats to Help Detect Landmines in Mozambique
Tanzania announced plans to dispatch hundreds of rats trained in mine detection and demobilization to landmine-infested Mozambique, following a three-year training program conducted by the Solvay University of Agricultural (SUA), APOPO, a Belgian research organization that was created in response to the global landmine problem, named the project in 2000. Professor Cox, coordinator of APOPO, indicated that test fields were currently being conducted that similar projects were planned for the future in Angola, Ethiopia, Bosnia and Cambodia. The Belgian and Finnish governments as well as the European Union and the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) have helped to fund the rat training and current project in Tanzania. The training of each rat takes generally six to 10 months, and once trained, each rat can cover about 150 sq m in 30 minutes.

Genetically Modified Plants as Possible Landmine Detectors

The U.S. and Canadian militaries have been working together to develop a method of using genetically modified plants to detect landmines. For the next two years, military personnel from both Canada and the United States along with researchers from the University of Alberta will attempt to create plants that will be able to indicate whether a particular area has landmines in the soil. Ideally, the new method would isolate certain bacterial genes that are able to detect chemical compounds and transfer those genes into the root of plants. Then, during the course of growth in the soil, the plants injected with the genes would come into contact with chemicals present in landmines that would cause an adverse reaction, such as change in the color of the leaves of a plant, indicating that landmines are present within the soil. Additionally, genetically modified plants could be dispersed in areas to ensure that the land is safe. The new detection method could potentially cost the land associated with landmine detection that are currently being used. However, because plants that have genetically modified plants would likely only be helpful for countries where conflicts have ended. The new plants will likely not be ready for use for another five years.

Japan Mine Action Service Wins International Cooperation Prize
In late October, the Japan Mine Action Service (JMAS) was selected as the winner of the Yomiuri Shinbun International Cooperation Prize, which honors organizations or individuals who have made outstanding contributions to international cooperation. JMAS helped clear over 15,000 landmines and objects of UXO in Cambodia in 2003 alongside members of the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC). The Japan is known to support Cambodia with mine removal as well as for mine detection and clearance. Beginning last year, JMAS dispatched landmine experts to Cambodia to begin landmine clearance and training to help to demonstrate to local personnel within Cambodia how to dispose of the mines and unexploded bombs. Yoshio Doi, a 60-year-old former Self-Defense Forces general, created JMAS in September of 2001. JMAS is currently planning to apply for more funding so its personnel can conduct mine removal in a wider scale and increase teams of local staff to further detection and clearance operations in Cambodia. JMAS also sent members to Afghanistan and hopes to continue contact with Danish mine clearance organizations.

Art Reach Program Helps Bosnian Children to Cope With Painful Memories

The ArtReach Foundation, an American nonprofit agency that sends artists professionals to war-afflicted countries to work with teachers and students, recently sent a group of American artists and their teacher to Bosnia. The Americans attempted to teach the Bosnian students "healing through art" using pen, paper, crayons and other art supplies. The team worked with 32 teachers and 30 students in Tuzla, a town located near Sarajevo where thousands of Muslims had been murdered in 1995 by the Bosnian-Serb army. Even eight years after the civil war in Bosnia ended, the killings and the effects of landmines in Sarajevo still haunt the memories of many Bosnian children. The artwork completed by the Bosnian students during the ArtReach program reflected the fear of mine-laden areas by children who included mines in their illustrations. The illustrations by the students of their future depicted the hopes of Bosnian children living in areas free of landmines. The ArtReach Foundation promotes creative and self-expressive educational methods, such as the visual and dramatic arts, to these students. One of ArtReach's goals in Bosnia is to develop a program manual for other art therapy teams to use to help give shape and direction anywhere in the world.