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Mine Awareness: The ICRC Approach

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Since their mine awareness programs began in 1996, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has adopted an approach based on local needs. Through close cooperation with the community, the ICRC aims to reduce mine/UXO casualties by changing dangerous behaviors and initiating appropriate, alternative long-term solutions.

by Julie Mullen, MAIC

A Brief History

The victims of conflict, both military personnel and civilian populations, endure the most devastating, lasting effects of war. Because governments are often in disarray after war, efforts to rebuild communities and assist victims are limited. With this neglect in mind, the ICRC was founded almost 150 years ago. As their mission states, the ICRC is an independent, neutral and impartial organization whose exclusive goal is the care and rehabilitation of victims of conflict both during and after conflict. By directing and coordinating international relief endeavors, the ICRC strives to protect the lives and dignity of victims. Not only do they take an active part in the ongoing assistance of survivors, but the ICRC also "endeavors to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles." With this goal, higher norms for future warfare can be established.

Initiation of Mine Action

In the early 1990s, the ICRC's field staff encouraged the organization to take action in the landmine crisis as they were treating an increasing number of landmine victims. Although at first the ICRC focused their efforts solely on universal ratification of the Treaty to Ban Landmines, by 1996 they saw the necessity for a more proactive role in the landmine crisis. They began a multi-faceted approach to reduce landmine casualties that includes data collection, community-based mine/UXO awareness programs and medical care.

Data Collection

In order to effectively prevent casualties, the ICRC must be able to provide each targeted population with specialized prevention techniques that address the local situation. To understand what the best approach would be for each individual area, the ICRC must begin with data collection. In particular, it is important to track what actions people take that put them most at risk for injury. For example, does a community take the risks they are taking because of denial of reality, social pressures, emotional factors or economic factors, or are they simply uneducated about the presence of landmines in their area? In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, it was found that 30 percent of landmine victims were injured or killed in areas they knew to be dangerous.¹ This information is vital in implementing appropriate solutions and promoting safe behavior to a specific area. In a case like Bosnia-Herzegovina's, simple methods of education, such as lectures and informative presentations, would not make strides in the prevention of casualties because many victims are already aware that their actions may cause injury. Instead, a strategy aimed at changing behavior and providing viable, long-term solutions to avoid dangerous situations would be more fruitful. ICRC staff along with other

programs. This monitoring and assessment of programs is necessary in order to adjust and reform programs to meet projected goals. However, the assessment of programs is not an easy task. Because both quantitative and qualitative measurements are necessary, it is often hard to pointedly decide exactly what factor is causing more or less casualties in any given area. In effect, it is hard to identify what strategy in the approach should be changed.

Integration With Local Mine Action Programs

When addressing the specific needs of a community, the solution may not always be within the ICRC's field of capabilities. Thus, it may be necessary to pass the information on to local Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for implementation. The extent of the national societies' involvement depends on the specific society's ability to administer the necessary program. In effect, the ICRC has continued to contribute to the development of the local Red Cross Societies and provide them with human resource support when working in partnership with them. The ICRC often "trains Red Cross members of the communities, who speak the language and know the culture, who can therefore implement mine awareness activities adapted to the specific needs of each community."³ In February 2000, the ICRC signed a memorandum of understanding in Kosovo with the Swiss Federation for Mine Action (SFMA), a non-governmental organization (NGO) engaged in demining activities. The goal was to provide the SFMA with information collected by ICRC mine awareness teams in communities affected by mines and UXO so that it could respond to urgent requests for clearance. If a response is not possible, the SFMA responds directly to the community; thus, the communities become directly involved in the technical response. The ICRC intends to implement this approach whenever possible.

In northern Albania, the Albanian Red Cross, the ICRC and the local authorities are supporting the SFMA and Danish Church Aid in their efforts to carry out clearance activities that will address the priority needs of affected communities. Assistance programs to mine survivors such as those fitting amputees with prostheses and small-scale projects providing vocational training (e.g., shoemaking) have also received ICRC support.

In Georgia/Abkhazia, the ICRC is supporting the mine awareness activities of the HALO Trust by organizing training courses and workshops and by sharing information on the activities, projects and materials used in other mine awareness programs throughout the region.

ICRC mine awareness activities have also been integrated with other programs in Afghanistan. The ICRC relief team works closely with the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) mine awareness team in the Bamyan region. In Mazar-i-Sharif, the ICRC mine action field officer takes part in the assessment of medical, water and sanitation needs.

Care and Assistance for Survivors

The ICRC by principle "does not distinguish between victims on the basis of the cause of their injury."⁴ Therefore, no program has been launched specifically for survivors of mine/UXO injuries. First aid and surgical and rehabilitative care are given in accordance with the needs of mine/UXO survivors; however, there are many beneficiaries of this care—it is not a program exclusively for victims of mines/UXO.

Conclusion

The approach of the ICRC's mine action programs is to involve the at-risk community in every step of the solution. Open conversation and input by the community members with ICRC staff provides the ICRC with the ability to implement the most effective approach to reduce dangerous behavior and prevent mine/UXO casualties. Although some solutions may be beyond the ICRC's capabilities, their close cooperation with local and national organizations make an effective solution possible.

1. Retrieved from www.icrc.org. September 17, 2002.
2. Desvignes, Laurence. E-mail Interview. October 11, 2002.
Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction, Vol. 6, Iss. 3 [2002], Art. 32
3. Desvignes, Laurence. E-mail Interview. October 11, 2002.
4. Strategy of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement on Landmines. Retrieved from www.icrc.org.
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