December 2002

Ending the Tragedy of Landmines Through Innovation and Cooperation

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Available at: http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol6/iss3/44

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The presence of landmines and their impact on mine-affected civilians and communities graphically reveals the destructive consequences of particular peoples and nations to resolve conflict at a given time in their history. Traumatically, with respect to landmines, the cessation of hostilities does not concurrently ensure the cessation of victims of war. All peoples and nations carry an undeniable moral responsibility to work towards reducing, and ultimately eliminating altogether, the causes which produce military conflict, and which in turn lead to the laying of landmines. As humanity strives to achieve this ideal, we must accept the humanitarian responsibility for doing all we can to heal the wounds of innocent civilians produced by war and conflict. And, I believe, we must do all we can to educate humanity about the presence and consequence of landmines and support those organizations, like the OAS, seeking to remove mines and restore dignity and self-worth to landmine survivors.

Witness to a Massive Destruction of Landmines

The following day, I was invited by the OAS to witness the destruction of 10,000 landmines from the Nicaraguan national stockpile in accordance with their commitment, as a signatory to the Ottawa Convention or Mine Ban Treaty. The event was attended by numerous dignitaries and representatives from organizations involved with mine action in Nicaragua and presided over by Minister of Defence, Dr. Jose Adan Goerza. The location in which the detonation was set to occur lay about two miles away from our observation area. Yet all attendees were given earplugs to buffer the view but the most powerful: that of three children walking along the road past the yellow caution tape demarcating the presence of the minefield. Apparently, these children were returning home from school, walking along the only path connecting their home to the school in Matiguas. I was reminded of the photograph I had received from our adopted village in Podvidia in which schoolchildren were walking in single file behind an adult. I wondered, “How many thousands of children must walk past skulls and bones and menacing rumors of a war’s deadly residue on a daily basis? How might such daily encounters with danger affect these children? How much of childhood innocence and wonder might these images destroy, to be replaced by feelings of insecurity and suspicion?”

While overlooking the Matiguas minefield, I asked the demining supervisor about any mine-related accidents that had occurred to the local population. He stated that eight people had been victims of landmines, five of whom had died. Apparently, none of these were children. He also claimed that 50 cattle had been killed while grazing.

As we drove back down the hill toward the minefield, I suddenly noticed a scene and asked my driver to stop the van just off the road, a short distance from the minefield, several dozen cattle lay in the shade of the trees, grazing or lounging, sleeping.

A Panoramic View of the Minefield: Its Proximity to Village Life

After this demonstration, we followed the deminers up a hill to gain a panoramic perspective of the minefield. Several aspects of this perspective stood out. First, this view revealed the enormity of the actual minefield, approximately 600 meters long or about six American football fields, according to Carlos Orozco, the national coordinator for the OAS mine action programs. Mr. Orozco also drew my attention to the numerous yellow flags visible within the minefield. These flags, the same type used to designate the detection of a mock mine in the previous demonstration, represented locations at which actual landmines had been detected. Perhaps 50 or more flags flew within the minefield as a testament to the deadly seriousness of this demining mission.

The second striking aspect to this view was the proximity of shelters and the local village of Matiguas to the minefield. To these residents, the minefield provided a graphic daily reminder of the consequences of war upon civilians, even after the cessation of hostilities.
Colin King discusses the multi-dimensional world of mine action. Colin King, an International Landmine and Explosive Ordnance Disposal Consultant, was an articulate and reasonable presence throughout the conference. He pointed out, both formally and informally, that the landmine/UXO situation is a very complex and multidimensional problem. Subsequently, the landmine/UXO solution must be both simple and multi-dimensional. Lloyd Feinberg, the manager of the Leahy War Victims Fund, shared his view: “There are no silver bullets, there are no simple solutions.”

Networking and Information Exchange

Many of the mine action attendees used the conference not only to reach out to the interested Rotarians, but also to exchange ideas with each other. Brigadier General Paddy Ried, a Mine Action Operations Expert, urged for increased integration of the various sectors of mine action. Users should be involved in development, and developers should be involved in use. “If a picture is worth thousand words, then a visit is worth a thousand pictures,” he said.

A large variety of NGOs were on hand to share information, provide advice and converse with each other. From small grassroots-oriented NGOs such as the Cambodia-based Rehab Oriented Surgical Enablement (ROSE) Charities to large-scale demining programs like Britain’s massive HALO Trust, virtually every aspect of mine action and victim assistance was represented. The Marshall Legacy Institute’s Mine Detection Dog Partnership Program gave a memorable demonstration of a dog in action; one of their enduring canine, Rosi, successfully found a mine hidden in an unidentified box of soil.

Although the ultimate aim of the conference was to harness the Rotarians’ vast expertise and charitable resources, a pleasant side-effect was the interaction of the other organizations present. There were ideas exchanged, partnerships discussed, and plans made. On more than one occasion, NGOs found themselves with a common goal and able to form a synergistic relationship. With luck, this conference (and others like it) will bring a more cooperative attitude to the mine action community.

Rotary Participation

The Rotarians proved themselves to be knowledgeable and eager participants. Despite the intensity and duration of the proceedings (both days stretched well into the evening), presentations and information were greeted only with interest and respect. Clubs from across the world were represented, many in countries with existing landmine problems.

Frank O’Dea, Director of the Canadian Landmine Foundation, invited the Rotarians to participate in 2005’s Night of 1000 Dinners. This charity event, to be held on December 5th, is an opportunity for individuals around the world to come together and sponsor a dinner to raise money for minefield clearance. O’Dea’s impassioned speech was interrupted by applause on numerous occasions. The Night of 1000 Dinners is coordinated specifically with Rotary International; last year, Rotarians were among the most prolific contributors.

Naturally, many of the various Rotarians present had doubts and concerns about involvement in mine action. Despite the great care taken by the NGOs, the scope and urgency of the worldwide landmine/UXO problem can be daunting. The problem is not localized, homogenous or benign; it is widespread, varied and severe. In such situations, it is hard to know where to start, or whether it is even worthwhile to contribute.

Rotary International’s massive drive to eradicate poverty, one of their most successful efforts, was a project with a definitive and realistic end-point. Mine action is patently different. Even the most optimistic expert admits that the world will probably never be mine-free. Furthermore, the radical degree to which the landmine problem varies from place to place makes the solution extremely complex. Nonetheless, the Rotarians’ doubts and concerns were appeased by the knowledge of the experts on hand. In fact, the very difficulty of the problem is what makes Rotary International so appropriate as a mine action partner. Far from mere cash cows, Rotarians are professional, political and academic authorities who have already contributed their knowledge and financial assistance to the cause of mine action.

Some of the Rotarians on hand for the event questioned the State Department’s commitment to humanitarian demining. One such individual was hesitant to lend financial assistance to the cause without the United States’ formal commitment to the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty. It seems that our government is unwilling to “set an example” for the private sector and for other countries, be
Colin King discuss the multidimensional world of mine action. Margaret Buse and Lloyd Posa’s Consular, was an arriera and different General Paddy Blagden, a Minister of mine action. Users should be involved to the interested Rotarians, but also to exchange ideas with each other. Brigadier General Paddy Rigden, a Mine Action Operations Expert, urged for increased integration of the various sectors of mine action. Users should be involved in development, and developers should be involved in use. “If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a visit is worth a thousand pictures,” he said.

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