HALO Trust in Angola

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HALO Trust in Angola

HALO Trust, a British charity, is gaining acclaim for both the scope and quality of their demining operations. In Angola, HALO has successfully adapted to an unstable political climate to help clear mines and allow for the return of hundreds of thousands of displaced refugees. In light of Angola’s newfound peace, the Trust plans to expand their operations and finish the job.

by David Hartley, MAIC

Introduction

With the landmine community increasingly saddled with political and bureaucratic constraints, HALO Trust is distinguished from other demining groups by the simplicity of their mission. This British-based non-governmental organization (NGO), the largest private non-profit demining organization in the world, shares any involvement in religious crusades or political campaigns and conferences. Instead, declares Africa desk officer Tim Porter, HALO seeks only to "get mines out of the ground...with as little fuss as possible." This no-nonsense demining stance has earned HALO an increasingly high international profile, highlighted by Princess Diana’s visit to Angola and the recent Japanese Celebrity Benefit CD, "Zero Landmine."

Founded in 1988, HALO divides its international operations into three basic regional groups: Africa, Asia and the Caucasus. Headed in Scotland by director Guy Willoughby and a number of desk officers, HALO is hierarchically run by program managers in each country of operation. Free from political distractions, HALO can focus on developing new technology and expanding their programs, which already boast 4,850 mine clearance personnel in nine countries.

Funding

HALO’s Angola program received $800,000 from the United States in the 2001 fiscal year, along with funding from the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the European Union. The majority of this budget pays the salaries of HALO’s employees. The United States has great faith in HALO Trust and is subsequently the NGO’s leading financial contributor. On June 19, Lincoln B. Blawnfield Jr., the Special Representative of the President and Secretary of State for Mine Actions, received an official commendation of HALO’s efforts. Worldwide, the Trust has destroyed more than one million landmines and items of UXO, as well as helped facilitate the operations of other humanitarian organizations.

With its growing profile, HALO Trust is encountering opportunities to pursue more substantial and diverse funding. The Rayúchi Sakuratomo-Iapanese Benefit music project, "Zero Landmine," has sold a surprisingly high number of copies, providing HALO Trust significant financial support for the last two years. The musical tribute to landmine awareness features a variety of international artists, including Cyncl Lauper and Brian Eno.

Research & Development

Hailed as a leader in research and development, HALO Trust has broken new ground in their use of selective armor, tractor mounted hedge and verge cutters, adapted and armored medium wheeled loaders, and demining dogs. HALO’s Mine Detection Dog (MDD) program has seen significant action throughout Africa and has been aided by the installation of six weather stations. The purchase of the weather stations will help HALO predict the optimal conditions for dog mine detection.

The Trust developed the use of visors without helmets, for improved demining comfort, as well as one-handed detectors and one-man robots. HALO has also experimented with a variety of methods for charging rechargeable batteries in the field.

Moreover, through their strict practices and innovation, HALO has gained a reputation as one of the safest demining operations in the world. For instance, they have "pioneered a systematic and very safe methodology with its dog teams, whereby ground is searched in a series of overlapping lanes to minimize the possibility of individual miners or UXO being missed." This late system, as well as other unique safety procedures, has given HALO Trust an injury rate of 116 injuries per 100,000 workers, a relatively small figure given the inherently dangerous nature of landmine/UXO removal.

HALO Trust gives all of their employees, including accountants and desk officers, the chance to work in the field. Given the growing rift between those with legitimate demining experience and those who make administrative and procedural decisions, this policy is refreshing. Ideally, all of the landmine community’s decision makers should have field experience and a subsequent appreciation for the arduous process of mine clearance.

HALO in Angola

HALO’s Africa program operates in Angola, Mozambique, Eritrea and Somaliland. Like its operations in Asia and the Caucasus, HALO’s Africa program employs a small administrative staff and emphasizes the development of local management. Of HALO’s 386 employees in Angola, 385 are locals and only the program manager is an expatriate. In Angola, HALO also owns and operates 23 Land Rovers, two Case 721 armored loaders, two Wer Wolf mine protected area-reduction vehicles, a Fiat Allis FL50 tracked dozer and a New Holland 110/90 armored vegetation cutter. This equipment is controlled and used by 26 separate demining teams.

HALO has been presented with a unique and daunting challenge in Angola. Not only does the South African nation have one of the most alarming landmine problems in the world (some sources estimate as many as 15 million landmines), but the Angolan socio-political situation is also notoriously unstable. To date, at least 76 different types of AP landmines have been found in Angola, manufactured in 22 different countries.

Civil War

Two decades of civil war have decimated Angola’s population and left an unplowed number of landmines and UXO throughout the nation. Although Angola has signed and ratified the Mine Ban Treaty, little has been done to stop the use of landmines. When AngolA’s electoral process collapsed in 1992, a period of indiscriminate mine laying continued.

Angola’s civil war is the longest in Africa. After winning independence from Portugal in 1975, Angola was torn between the U.S.-backed National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebels and the communist-supported People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). The collapse of the UN’s Angolan peace attempt in 1992 opened the gates for ten more years of bitter conflict. Since 1992, conflict has continued between the Angolan government forces (FAP) and the UNITA.

The conflict ultimately interrupted HALO’s demining operations. More importantly, however, the political turmoil displaced hundreds of thousands of Angolan citizens. These bystanders were driven from their homes and forced to seek solace around Angola’s central provincial capitals. For HALO, this has created an urgent and unique demining scenario.

A Downturn in Security

In Angola, HALO seeks simply to "clear land so people can build homes," "remove mines which inhabit the work of aid agencies," and provide internally displaced persons (IDPs) with "safe access to agricultural land." The organization has been clearing land in Angola since 1994, but had a definitive shift in operational procedure in 1998.

With the increasing FAP/UNITA turmoil and a subsequent "downturn in security," HALO’s operations were restricted to less than 30 km around Huambo and Kuito in the Bie province. This meant that the land that HALO had previously surveyed was abandoned. Although they have no evidence of mining in Angola, HALO chose not to demine areas in danger of changing hands between government forces. Also, due to the increased deployment of anti-vehicle (AV) mines, HALO has been almost completely dependent on antic for logistics.

Furthermore, HALO was faced with a massive migration of IDPs into government-controlled territory. Due to military conflicts in the outer municipalities, as many as 80,000 IDPs flocked to Kuito, and up to half a million to Huambo. Working with other humanitarian organizations to provide for the influx of refugees, HALO tooled through most of 1999, 2000 and 2001 to clear land around the provincial capitals. The Angolan IDPs were pouring into the area, "trying to compete with each other for strips of land on which to grow crops." Shantytowns with open sewers and virtually no basic amenities sprang up, forcing refugees to scavenge for food wherever it could be found. These makeshift communities often appeared in close proxim...
An Interview with Hendrik Ehlers of MgM

Hendrik Ehlers discusses the challenges facing demining in Africa, research and development, and mechanical clearance used by his company. His candid replies offer insight into the world of demining and managing a multifaceted organization.

by Margaret Busé, Editor

Margaret Busé (MB): Can you describe how MgM came to be formed in Germany in 1996?

Hendrik Ehlers (HE): My friend and partner since childhood, Hans Georg Kruessel, and I were on Christmas leave back home, when we learned that our contracts with GPC seconding ADP in Mozambique as instructors and supervisors of the survey plus explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) section were not renewed. We had no chance but to do what many people had told us to do before: make our own non-governmental organization (NGO). With the help of our old school pal Christoph Brocks this was done within a few days and MgM was legally founded on January 16, 1996.

MB: What do you feel are the most unique aspects of MgM that set it apart from other demining organizations?

HE: The above structure is absolutely unique and so is the fact that both of us have no formal military background or similar education. We started with one company and we run ours with decentralized decision-making. MgM is a unique and effective response to today’s challenges.

MB: How has your experience, and the experience of the founders of MgM, shaped the way MgM has been structured?

HE: We wanted to avoid the situation that a HQ and board members in Germany could negatively influence our fieldwork. Therefore, the entire board, but three members, retired five years after the foundation case of UXO was removed. Hans Georg and I remained as majority over the silent third. Christoph, then the fifth member, introduced the structure of MgM and we ran off into the bush. That gave us the unique structure to be in the field and to be on top of the organization.

MB: How many personnel does MgM have?

HE: MgM is not run by a HQ but by a board of directors. Our organization is semi-autonomous. We have approximately 450 personnel at the moment, divided into five divisions.

MB: Why did you choose the name MgM?

HE: MgM stands for a new organizational form developed in Germany in the 1970s. MgM is a unique and effective response to today’s challenges.

MB: How do you see the future of MgM?

HE: We believe that MgM will continue to grow and expand its operations in the coming years. We are committed to continuing our work in Africa and are looking to expand to other regions as well.

References

1. Interview with Tim Potter, head of HALO's Office for Africa, December 6, 2002.
7. HALO Trust.