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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 controversy, HALO’s efforts to remove mines out of the ground...have become relatively more visible. The Trust has broken new ground in the use of selectiveama- neau)))

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 Bloomfield Jr., the Special Representative of the President and Secretary of State for Mine Action, reiterated 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.

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 vis- sors without helmets, for improved demining comfort, as well as one handed detectors and one-man drills. HALO has also experimented with a variety of methods for charging rechargeable batteries in the field.

Moreover, through their strict prac- tices and innovation, HALO has gained a reputation as one of the fastest 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 possi- bility of individual mines or UXO being missed. Their “late game,” 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 danger- ous nature of landmine/UXO removal.

HALO Trust gives all of their em- ployees, 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 pro- cedural decisions, this policy is refreshing. Ideally, all of the landmine community’s decision makers should have field expe- rience 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 pro- gram employs a small administrative staff and emphasizes the development of lo- cal management. Of HALO’s 386 em- ployees 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 armoured vehicles, a Fiat Allis F15 tracked dozer and a New Holland 110/90 armored vegetation cutter. This equip- ment 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 structure 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 deci- mated Angola’s population and left an ungod 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 be- tween the U.S. backed National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebels and the communist-sup- ported People’s Movement for the Lib- eration of Angola (MPLA). The collapse of the UN’s Angolan peace attempt in 1992 opened the gates for 10 more years of bitter conflict. Since 1992, conflict has continued between the Angolan government forces (FAN and the UNITA.

The conflict ultimately interrupted HALO’s demining operations. More im- portantly, 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 pro- vincial 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 inhibit the work of aid agencies,” and provide internally displaced persons (IDPs) with “safe access to agricultural land.” The organiza- tion has been clearing land in Angola since 1994, but had a definitive shift in operational procedure in 1998. With the increasing FAA/UNITA turmoil and a subsequent “downturn in security,” HALO’s operations were re- stricted 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. Al- though they have no evidence of remine 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 com- pletely dependent on aircraft for logistics. Furthermore, HALO was faced with a massive migration of IDPs into govern- ment-controlled territory. Due to mili- tary conflict in the outer municipalities, as many as 80,000 IDPs fled to Kuito, and up to half a million to Huambo. Working with other humanitarian organi- zations to provide for the influx of refu- gees, HALO toiled 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 sewages and virtually no basic amenities sprang up, forcing refugees to scavenge for food wherever it could be found. These makeshift commu- nities often appeared in close proxim-
Angolan landmine statistics are exaggerations. Now, with some figures as high as 15 million, HALO believes there are one million landmines in Angola at the most. HALO Trust mine clearance consultant David Frederick credits a "lack of research and thorough investigation" for this misinformation. The problem, although severe, is finite and tangible.

Furthermore, both Frederick and Angola desk officer Tim Porter challenge UN reports of widespread mining in Angola. The most urgent factor is not thousands of new, recently deployed mines, but instead the movement of IDPs through previously mined sites. While some anti-tank mines have been laid on roads, there is simply "no evidence of remining that is taking place."

The Future of Demining in Angola

HALO Trust approaches the Angolan landmine crisis with confidence and vigor. With many prospects for new funding, the organization plans on finishing the job quickly and efficiently. As well as a new grant from the U.S. State Department, HALO anticipates that their high profile in Japan will encourage the Japanese government to subsidize the demining effort. With more and more plentiful financial support, HALO plans to "get on the ground, survey, choose the highest priority sites, and expand our clearance coverage across the provinces." The death of Savimbi and the subsequent collapse of the UNITA army should finally give HALO the opportunity to operate throughout Angola. Hundreds of sites in the central provinces have already been identified and prioritized, according to humanitarian concerns. By the end of 2003, HALO plans on doubling their aural and visual equipment. Such a substantial augmentation to HALO's already impressive arsenal will allow them to spread their operations into Angola's outer municipalities.

Conclusion

In the past decades, a variety of Angolan peace attempts have proven fleeting and temporary. Therefore, the nation's citizens are skeptical that the cease-fire signed on April 4th will endure. HALO Trust, however, feels confident that the most recent peace attempt is different. While no one can predict Angola's future, the circumstances surrounding the FAA/UNITA cease-fire suggest that the conflict will not resume. Savimbi, UNITA's feamost leader, is dead and his army has disintegrated. These two factors alone should prevent conflict for the time being.

For all of the humanitarian organizations operating in Angola, the newfound peace is both a welcome blessing and a daunting challenge. HALO Trust plans on playing an important role in Angola rebuilding. HALO's efforts will allow other NGOs to operate effectively and accommodate the hundreds of thousands of IDPs moving to Angola's outer municipalities. As leaders in research and development, safety, efficiency and funding, HALO is both confident and capable. If other humanitarian organizations follow HALO Trust lead, Angola's desperate needs will soon be met.

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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 Buse, Editor

Margaret Buse (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 Krussen, and I were Christmas leave back home, when we learned that our contract with GPC seconding to GPC 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 Brooks 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 is the fact that both of us have no formal military background or similarities in education. Well, I was conscripted for a year as a radar operator on the Hawk system. We learned everything in the field by doing it, which as a side effect generated a number of self-built clearance and management devices that actually work. A very important thing is that we work in a team of multi-trades with maximum decentralization and decision-making. We are a group of friends and 99 percent of our stuff

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 every year after the foundation case of beer was emptied. Hans Georg and I remained as majority over the silent third, Christoph. Krussen then changed the IT 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. We call that the reversed pyramid. This enables us to be very flexible and to react based on field realities rather than having to ask some distant body if we may buy a new truck or start a new operation. Without that, our Angola operations would have stopped long ago, just because there was no funding... To take it one step further, Hans Geor and me both later became chairman, which lets us take the entire legal responsibility, too.

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