

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 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, shuns 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."¹ This no-nonsense demining stance has earned HALO an increasingly high international profile, highlighted by the late Princess Diana's visits 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 19th, Lincoln P. Bloomfield Jr., the Special Representative of the President and Secretary of State for Mine Action, released 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 Ruyichi Sakomato-led Japanese 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 Cyndi 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 drills. 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 mines or UXO being missed."² This lane 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.³

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 FL5B tracked dozer and a New Holland 110/90 armored vegetation cutter. This equip-

ment is controlled and used by 26 separate demining teams.

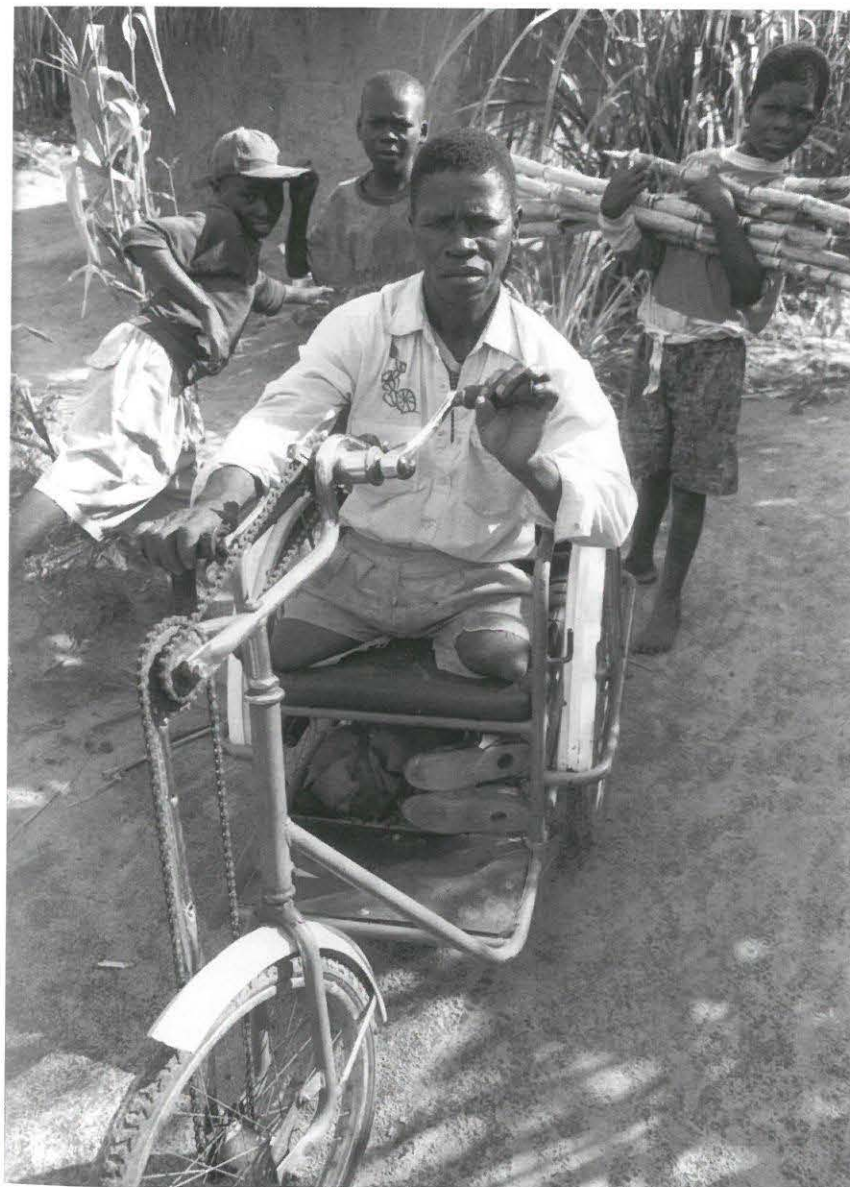
HALO has been presented with a unique and daunting challenge in Angola. Not only does the South African nation have one of the most alarming landmine problems in the world (some sources estimate as many as 15 million landmines), but the Angolan socio-political situation is also notoriously unstable. 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 untold 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 commenced.

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 governmental forces (FAA) 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 inhibit the work of aid agencies," and provide internally displaced persons (IDPs) with "safe access to agricultural land."⁴ The organization 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 restricted to less than 30 km around Huambo and Kuito in the Bie province.⁵ This meant that the land that HALO had previously surveyed was abandoned. Although they have no evidence of remining 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 aircraft for logistics.

Furthermore, HALO was faced with a massive migration of IDPs into government-controlled territory. Due to military conflict 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 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."⁶ Shantytowns with open sewage and virtually no basic amenities sprung up, forcing refugees to scavenge for food wherever it could be found. These makeshift communities often appeared in close proxim-

■ This Angolan landmine victim lost his legs to an AP mine. c/o ICRC

ity to landmine/UXO-contaminated areas.

Nevertheless, the Trust responded to 1998's downturn in security with resolve and determination. HALO's efforts in Angola have cemented their reputation as one of the best mine clearance organizations in the world. As of April 2002, HALO had removed and destroyed 9,537 mines and 53,024 items of UXO. 1,548,474 square meters of land has been cleared manually, while 1,480,228 square meters have been cleared mechanically. In addition, HALO has cleared 2,632,810 square meters of battle area.⁷

Peace in Angola

HALO Trust's Angola program is run from Huambo, one of the central provinces on the nation's high plateau (planalto). Their presence is centered mainly in this region, although in light of recent developments, the NGO plans to branch out. On April 4th of this year, UNITA and the FAA signed a cease-fire following the February 22nd assassination of infamous UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi. Reportedly, UNITA's forces are starving, demoralized and in no position to launch any type of military offensive. Therefore, most analysts are cautiously optimistic that the peace will last, at least for the foreseeable future.

This welcomed upturn in security has meant that the hundreds of thousands of IDPs are or are planning on rehabilitating their villages in the outer municipalities. The shantytowns surrounding Huambo and Kuito will soon be abandoned, and IDPs will attempt to reclaim their old land or establish new holdings. Again, HALO is being forced to adapt to Angola's tempestuous political climate. The mine sites identified during the 90s need to be resurveyed and cleared. As IDPs move back into previously mined areas, HALO is resuming, with renewed urgency, the work they reluctantly abandoned in 1998.

Avoiding Misinformation

Although HALO will not understate the urgency of Angola's landmine/UXO situation, the organization is quick to point out that widely publicized

landmine statistics are exaggerations. 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 Africa desk officer Tim Porter challenge UN reports of widespread remining 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."⁸

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 public profile in Japan will encourage the Japanese government to subsidize the demining effort. With new and more plentiful financial support, HALO plans to "get on the ground, survey, choose the highest priority sites, and expand our clearance cover across the provinces."⁹ 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 concern. By the end of 2003, HALO plans on doubling their national staff to more than 800, as well as importing further CASE armored loaders, vegetation cutters and demining 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 fearsome leader for years, is dead and his army devastated. 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's 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's lead, Angola's desperate needs will soon be met. ■

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