Africa: It's Big!

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Africa: It's Big!

by Dennis Barlow, Director, MAIC

A great opera commentator, John Cuthbrow was once asked to describe the monumental Wagners' Ring Cycle using only one word. After pondering the question for a moment he responded by characterizing it as, "long." At this, his obvious answer seemed more flippant than serious, but a little thought leads one to conclude that Cuthbrow was on to something. Many words could describe the Ring: monumental, bombastic, fantastic, convoluted, stirring, mythological, but each limits the scope or makes a judgment which may not be ultimately true. The truth is that someone who wants to tackle the Ring must be prepared to undergo quite a long journey—an investment in both time and emotion—to discover the many treasures, which may reward the patient and skilled listener.

The Challenge of African "Bigness"

The challenge, as Africa itself, may be described as simply "Big." We might be daunted by the fact that the landmass there could be described as complex, multi-dimensional, problematic, or difficult. On the other hand, we might be tempted to see the promise of a dream fulfilled and describe the situation as potentially hopeful, coordinated, focused, or promising. But we would be well cautioned to approach the challenge of landmine remediation in Africa, much as the Wagners did: with patience and diligence—and the clear recognition that the landmine problem in Africa is a multifaceted puzzle which can, only with the most energetic and dedicated of outlaws, yield dramatic and inspiring results.

So in dealing with Africa, let us first accept that it is big and diverse. There are long distances to and from landmine-affected areas; there are vast and dramatic topographical environments ranging from desert to tropical forest, from lush and verdant fields to barren alkali planes. Threatened people live in the cities, in tribes, and are nomadic or sedentary, often displaced or in refugee status. Almost every conceivable kind of landmine has been planted in Africa over the past sixty years. African countries represent varying kinds of political outlooks and economic capabilities, just as they are homes to peoples of different races and dialects. And often conflicting, philosophies, tribal outlooks, and religions. The size and scope of the space and the people that Africa are too big to lend themselves to a "one-size-fits-all" landmine remediation scheme. Therefore, several approaches are encouraged to maximize the threat for success in planning and conducting mine action campaigns in Africa.

Synchronize Your Watches—and Your Plans

The first observation is that since Africa is too big and too diverse to treat uniformly, no one organization or mine action methodology will work everywhere. The key to comprehending why this is the synchronization of complementary efforts made possible by the best possible integration, cooperation, and communication of involved organizations. This recognition and its implied interaction between different groups' activities extend beyond mine action to other families of humanitarian action.

Very often mine action projects can be accomplished best in conjunction with activities such as civic action projects, feeding programs, public health missions, agriculture and land reclamation, or post-conflict support. Any organization hoping to maximize or insure the lasting effects of its mine action mission would be well advised to link its activities to other relief or humanitarian efforts.

Light One Candle

A second consideration is to attempt to win small and achievable victories. I am reminded of the profound slogan, which advises us to "Think globally, act locally." Any one organization's attempts to try to unilateral take the lead in trying to solve Africa's landmine problems will be as frustrating as it is undesirable, and has every likelihood of becoming counterproductive. The trick is to find an approach which is feasible, logical, and politically supportable, focusing on realistic tasks, and politically expedient. The project should have as its goal an end state, which is realistic (even if not yet achievable) and meaningful to the community, and which will be part of an even greater national tapestry.

This kind of approach is what non-governmental organizations (NGO) have done so remarkably well in the area of mine action over the last ten years they have merely tried "to do good" and develop a program around that simple concept. If kept in perspective, and with resource support, the hundreds of NGOs at work on landmine remediation in Africa can steadily and relentlessly achieve cumulative improvements which can demonstrably advance the pan-African solution to the landmine threat.
Consider Every Available Tool

The third suggestion is to use every advantage, every tool, which can help each organization maximize its efficiencies and effectiveness. Wanting to do the right thing is indeed the key motivator, but it is, in itself does not ensure efficient or successful accomplishment of the project. Twenty years ago a well-meaning NGO would go to Africa and pretty much had to rely on applying the resources donated by a certain church or donor. Today most organizations involved in mine action (or humanitarian demining) can multiply their efforts by utilizing "smart" support services and products being developed and offered by various organizations globally—often free of charge.

The list of tools available to most mine action practitioners in the past three years alone is quite considerable. It is literally impossible to mention here all the help available to organizations involved in mine action, but a short list would include the following services. Up to date country information is provided in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines Landmine Monitor Report. Geographical support is rendered by the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining and the Mine Action Information Center (MAIC) at James Madison University. Information support has been spearheaded by the Information Mine Action System (IMAS) developed by the GICH. Mine action management courses are available at Cranfield University. International mine action standards, developed under the auspices of the UN Mine Action Services (UNMAS), the GICH, and the MAIC are posted on the UNM SIN E-Mine web page. Training support is available from a number of countries such as Denmark and France. Reporting mechanisms and forms have been designed and offered by Handicap International. Survey (impact) reports are available from the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. Landmine identification CDs are available from the U.S. government. Information on access to these and many other valuable services and products are regularly posted on such helpful and user friendly websites as the UNMIS E-Mine, the JMU MAIC, and the GICH web sites.

In spite of the daunting nature of the landmine threat in Africa, mine action groups can do three things to prepare them to help save the bone. One is to provide their organizations with the best mine action goods and services available; today that includes a panoply of information, systems, computer aids, and training to help plan and conduct a well-coordinated and thought out campaign. The second is to plan an operation small enough to control and to ensure local success, but still tied to a goal which can be measured and aggregated to the effort in the whole country or region. Thirdly, multiply the effectiveness of the project and ensure its sustainability by integrating it with capacity building techniques and other humanitarian activities under way or planned in the area.

Soldiers are fond of talking about additional efforts, which increase the effectiveness of an operation; they call such complementary efforts, "force multipliers." While landmines are not the most dangerous threat facing Africa, the mine action approach to solving that problem may bring needed cooperation, application, and focus, to overall thrust of relief and humanitarian operations there and thus become a major "development multiplier" and make Africa a little less "big."  

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Landmine News Around the World

POSTCARDS WRITTEN FOR PEACE
As part of the festivities surrounding the 2002 World Cup soccer tournament, which took place in both Korea and Japan, the Korea and Japan Campaigns to Ban Landmines (KCBL and JCBL) created a program entitled "A Goal for All." KCBL and JCBL asked citizens to submit a message or illustration of peace to those affected by landmines on a postcard, in an effort to illustrate the severe consequences of these mines. The organizations hope to use the diverse audience of the World Cup to draw attention to landmine issues, specifically to the universal ban of landmines. All collected postcards were displayed in June 2002 at Yokohama Arena in Tokyo, Japan, where the final game of the tournament was held.

ILLEGAL LANDMINE TRANSACTION UNCOVERED
Landmine Action, the United Kingdom's chapter of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), recently uncovered an illegal attempt by a local company to sell AP mines. PW Defense Limited, an arms company located in Derbyshire, was attempting to sell landmines at arms fairs in Greece, South Africa and London. Also, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) reports that in April 2002, it tape-recorded a senior representative from PW Defense Limited offering 500 landmines to a journalist in London. After the government signed the Mine Ban Treaty in December 1997 and created the Landmine Act of 1998, trading landmines become illegal throughout the United Kingdom and punishable up to 14 years in prison.

BEES USED TO LOCATE LANDMINES
Funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's (DARPA) Controlled Biological Systems Program, chemists from the Department of Energy's Sandia National Laboratories (DOE/SNL) and entomologists from the University of Montana (UM) recently began a study to determine if foraging bees could detect landmines. Scientists hope that the bee can be trained to find TNT and bring the proof back on their statically charged bodies. To accomplish this goal, UM scientists must decipher which explosives the bees can actually smell and then train them to find these chemicals. Researchers are also studying the ways that plants might absorb TNT particles into their roots, consequently affecting other parts, specifically their pollen. The ultimate goal of the project is to establish bee hives near suspected minefields, monitoring flight activity and analyzing hive samples in order to distinguish contaminated areas from safe areas.

INDIA AND PAKISTAN LAY LANDMINES ALONG COMMON BORDER
The Pakistani attack on the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001, began intense fronting between the two nations and consequently, the laying of the largest number of anti-personnel and anti- vehicle landmines since the origination of the Mine Ban Treaty in 1997. India began laying landmines along the border on December 25, 2001, and is still doing so as of this date. In fact, some reports state that India plans to cover its entire 1,800-mile border with mines; this would create some three-mile-wide minefields. Media reports state that Pakistan has also laid additional landmines. A letter from the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington, D.C. to the ICBL says, "Pakistan has been obliged to take precautionary defense measures." The government, however, has not verified this information. Regardless, civilians are being injured and killed on both sides, although with more frequency in India.

KENYAN HERDERS Files LAWSUIT AGAINST UNITED KINGDOM
Members of the Masai and Samburu ethnic groups in Kenya have filed a lawsuit against the British Army seeking compensation for damages caused by the UXO that the British allegedly abandoned. Not only do they wish compensation for the victims and their families, they also want the British Army to stop its training efforts in Kenya. The plaintiff's British lawyer recently began to gather data in support of the herders' case, which has proven to be a difficult task. While he has the death certificates of numerous children who have been killed by UXO, the cause of death simply stems from blast exposure with no further details documented. Kenya Attorney General Armos Wikso has been quoted as saying that military agreements between the United Kingdom and Kenya are classified and will only be publicized "when necessary." Most recently in July 2002, the British government agreed to pay the Kenyans $7 million (U.S.) in compensation on a "limited liability basis.

HALO TRUST CLEARS 1,000,000 LANDMINES AND UXO
On June 19, 2002, HALO Trust announced that it has cleared 1,000,000 landmines and UXO. Receiving funding from the U.S. government, United Nations, European Commission, other governments and numerous individual donors, HALO Trust is the largest non-profit mine-clearing organization, employing over 4,500 people.