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# Mine Action: Success and Challenges

by Sayed Aqa [ Mine Action Team Leader, UNDP ]



Since the launch of the first civilian mine action operations in Afghanistan in 1988, significant progress has been made to rid the world of this terrible weapon—a weapon that kills and maims so many and presents a persistent obstacle to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in many countries. Based on the successful advocacy of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and the organization's work with governments, 122 states banned the production, use and stockpiling of landmines by signing the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention in 1997. Today, just eight years later, 144 states have ratified or acceded to this Convention, while others are addressing the landmines issue through relevant protocols of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).

Nevertheless, numerous challenges remain. Millions of people, mostly in the poorest communities of the developing world, continue to suffer from the direct and indirect effects of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). In addition, approximately a third of the world's nations, including a number of powerful countries, have yet to renounce production, use and trade of APLs. Finally, greater assistance is needed to address the needs of landmine victims and to clear mined areas.

## Background

It is worth tracing some of the history that has led to this point. Little was known about the global landmine problem until the late 1980s. Up to that time, mine clearance had primarily been done by armed forces for military purposes, but that changed in early 1988 when a relatively small community development project being undertaken by the international non-governmental organization (NGO) World Vision International (WVI) faced landmine problems in the Chamkani district of Paktia province in Afghanistan. The members of the project management team discussed the problem one evening in their office in a remote village under the light of a solar lamp. The then-country director of WVI, Rae McGrath, suggested that mines had to be cleared in order to allow two projects—the Jani Khail road linking the province with a border

town in Pakistan, and an irrigation canal vital for agriculture in the district—to be completed. The issue of mine removal was discussed in depth but no expertise within the project team existed.

In a routine coordination meeting of the more than 100 international NGOs providing assistance to Afghan refugees, McGrath described the problem and suggested that he could arrange the training of local deminers by ex-military explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) experts with whom he had contact. All the NGOs strongly objected and thought McGrath was imprudent, arguing that humanitarian organizations should not engage in mine clearance, as it is a purely military task. But there was simply no way that rehabilitation and development work could be undertaken in Chamkani unless mines were cleared. McGrath and the team persisted and the first-ever organized civilian mine-clearance project was initiated in mid-1988.

That same year, it was expected that a large number of refugees would return home as a result of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, increasing the risk of mine accidents. For this reason, the United Nations established a mine clearance training programme for Afghanistan in late 1988. The main idea was to train a three-person demining team from each village where refugees

**The key to addressing most challenges is effective coordination.**

were expected to return and equip them with basic tools so they could help clear mines in their own villages. A number of countries provided military contingents and trained about 12,000 Afghan refugees. It was soon realized, however, that this approach was not practical for many reasons. There were concerns for the safety of deminers, quality of work, lack of medical support and on-site supervision, and fear that landmines would be re-used.

The United Nations then helped establish a number of local NGOs to undertake various aspects of mine action, including mine risk education (MRE), mine clearance training, minefield survey and mine clearance. Victim assistance was addressed by the International Committee of the Red Cross, a number of non-demining NGOs, and later through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Comprehensive Disabled Afghan Programme.

In 1991, Bobby Muller of the Vietnam

Veterans of America Foundation (VVAFA) and Thomas Gebauer of Medico International (a German NGO) agreed to launch an international effort to ban landmines. Handicap International (France), Human Rights Watch (U.S.), Physicians for Human Rights (U.S.), and the Mines Advisory Group (UK) formally launched the ICBL in 1992. The ICBL was joined by a large number of NGOs and national campaign networks, including those from mine-affected countries, calling for a total ban on APLs. The ICBL efforts, supported by a number of visionary leaders from governments (such as Lloyd Axworthy of Canada), resulted in the creation of the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.

## Progress

Over the years, Afghan NGOs, with the support of the United Nations, developed excellent skills and tools to undertake all aspects of mine action. Groundbreaking progress was made in training and comprehensive technical and socio-economic survey methodologies, as well as in manual and mechanical mine clearance, often with extensive use of mine detection dogs (MDDs).

A number of international NGOs specializing in mine action were established in late 1991 and 1992. The United Nations also helped establish mine action programmes in Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Cambodia, Mozambique, and elsewhere.

The progress since then has been the result of close cooperation among government representatives, the United Nations, and civil society. There has been excellent implementation so far and, as mentioned, significant progress in terms of a reduction in production and use of APLs, an almost total end to their trade and transfer, and the destruction of tens of millions of stockpiled mines. Perhaps the ultimate recognition of the ICBL and the role of civil society in addressing the landmine crisis was the awarding of the Noble Peace Prize to the organization in 1997. Improvements in the relevant CCW Protocols are also noteworthy.

No treaty is perfect and there are a number of areas in which international law regarding mine action can be further strengthened. For instance, issues about the definition of APLs and the use of anti-vehicle mines with sensitive fuses, stronger language and obligations regarding victim assistance, and increased resources in the field are key areas for improvement. Additional immediate measures are also needed in the framework of the CCW to address the issue of explosive remnants of war (ERW), particularly cluster munitions (CMs).

Working with non-state actors (NSAs) to respect the norms established by the Convention has been another major step forward. Civil society, led by the NGO Geneva Call has had major success in getting a large number of NSAs to sign a Deed of Commitment, renouncing the use of APLs.

The international community has provided significant resources for mine action activities. Major progress has also been made in developing mechanisms, tools and procedures for mine action, including developing the International Standards for Mine Action (IMAS), establishing national mine action institutions, enhancing national capacity and ownership, encouraging cooperation among mine-affected states, coordinating donors, and, last but not least, developing a U.N. policy and strategy for mine action. There has also been a successful global effort to better define and measure the scope and impact of the landmine problem through the implementation of Landmine Impact Surveys and the introduction of information management systems for mine action.

## Challenges

The landmine problem is still far from being adequately addressed. Despite impressive progress, key challenges lie ahead. Vast tracts of valuable land continue to be plagued by landmine and ERW contamination. Thousands of people continue to fall victim to landmines each year, while medical, rehabilitation and full re-integration services remain woefully inadequate. Many countries have yet to join the Ottawa Convention, and coordination among mine-affected states, donors, the United Nations and civil-society organizations needs further improvement. In addition, the mine action community needs to identify creative and effective ways to further raise public awareness of the issue. Most importantly, given its multi-dimensional nature, mine action must be fully mainstreamed into international peace and security, humanitarian and development programmes wherever appropriate.

The Action Plan, adopted during the Nairobi Summit on a Mine-Free World (November 29–December 3, 2004), addresses most of these challenges. The international community now needs to ensure that the Action Plan is translated into practical and achievable goals and activities at the national and international level.

In addition to increased resources, the key to addressing most of these challenges is effective coordination. Donor countries can play a valuable supportive role at the national—but more importantly at the global—level. It may not be an exaggeration to say that little coordination can take place if the donors do not make it a key priority and even a pre-condition for funding. While the establishment of the Mine Action Support

Group and the Resource Mobilization Contact Group are welcome initiatives, each and every donor organization should ensure that its global, geographic, and thematic plans and priorities are well-coordinated and that decisions are made with adequate information concerning national priorities and other donor plans and programmes. Regular donor meetings would be helpful in this regard, as would ensuring that all projects are part of—or at minimum can demonstrate a clear link to—national mine action plans.

**Mine action is not necessarily an end in itself, but a means to reduce human suffering.**

Linking mine action with other national and global priorities is another challenge. Concerns have been raised that post-Nairobi interest in mine action may drop off at the global level, as there are many competing priorities. The fact is, however, that landmines and ERW, in addition to their direct impact, cause great indirect harm by blocking access to agricultural and other potentially productive land, water points, schools, medical facilities and the like. They hinder internally displaced person (IDP)/refugee return and, in many other ways, have an impact on all other peace, security and human development efforts. Inclusion of mine action in national development plans, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), and U.N. Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs) is one way to address this challenge. There is no doubt that mine action can help other sectors reach their objectives, including peace building, democratic governance, poverty reduction or other elements of the MDGs. Such policy integration will not only help address the needs of affected communities but will also open the door for significant additional resources to mine action, from both national resources and official development assistance. Mine action in support of development and reconstruction in Afghanistan and Croatia confirms this.

The global technical and management capacity for mine action is overly stretched around the world. This fact is particularly true of donors and international organizations, including the United Nations. Most donors have only one or two mine action staff members providing support to a large number of countries. Similarly, allocation of financial resources to a large number of countries on an annual basis results in extended programmes, particularly in countries with a relatively small landmine problem. A new “completion initiative” would bolster efforts worldwide. A well-articulated and coordinated plan that specifically targets countries with smaller landmine problems to finish the job sooner will offer sever-

al important benefits. First, after completing the job in these countries, human and financial resources could be focused on countries with more serious problems; second, the political incentive of being able to declare success in terms of countries cleared of mines merits the provision of additional resources; third, this type of plan will save resources in the long run by reducing overhead costs for these small programmes; and fourth, early release of land for productive use will result in greater economic return on investment.

Developing appropriate national capacities must remain a high priority. As mentioned, the primary responsibility of addressing the landmine problem lies with the mine-affected state. Almost all countries with significant landmine problems have established national planning and coordination mechanisms. While some have made good progress in terms of developing a sustainable mine action capacity, most have a long way to go. The political and financial commitment of the governments of mine-affected countries is critical; however, some countries do need external support to develop their national capacities. Capacity development is relatively under-funded. Modest investment in capacity development will help to ensure mine action is implemented in the most effective manner, resulting in significant savings through improved coordination, planning and prioritization.

While assistance in mine action is driven by its impact on people, similar to national capacity development, victim assistance has not received adequate support and aid. Long after landmines are all cleared, the survivors will live with their consequences for the rest of their lives. Help for victims of landmines must increase dramatically for mine action to be credible.

Another area that has received too little attention is ERW—particularly CMs—which are also affecting the lives of millions of people around the world. In some heavily contaminated countries, trends have shifted, and more civilian accidents are caused by ERW than by landmines. Indeed, such was the case in Cambodia last year. Addressing the ERW problem, including CMs, requires urgent attention. ERW/CMs have similar impact (if not more) on communities as landmines. Current thinking with respect to ERW/CMs is at a nascent stage, as it was in 1988 regarding landmines. Should we learn from the landmine experience and take immediate action in this area, or wait 16 years to learn it all over again the hard way? This choice must be made—and quickly.

A key challenge for civil society is the concern that ICBL leadership may be losing interest post-Nairobi, and some recent staff changes in the ICBL have increased this concern. While some

*Continued on page 35, UNDP*

agreement with the government.”<sup>8</sup> In hindsight, it is probably fair to say that such a comprehensive agreement with the government, specifying in detail the tasks of the MACC in terms of local mine action capacity building, may have prevented the subsequent actions of the government—but there was no turning back now.

By order of the government, all activities of the MACC in support of EMAP stopped abruptly. With the departure of the NGOs, this also meant that the MACC’s coordinating responsibilities of humanitarian demining were no longer relevant, except in so far as UNMEE MACC’s own demining assets were concerned. Overnight the MACC was stripped of its responsibilities. But the MACC lost no time in re-defining its mission and the management structure of its activities, doing so with competence and creativity.

## The Way Forward

By October 2002, the MACC submitted a revised work plan for its programme. This work plan was expeditiously approved by the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the U.N. Mine Action Service (UNMAS) and UNMEE. Of greatest importance in respect to this newly developed work plan was the decision to integrate the Peacekeeping Force demining capacity within a civilian-run MACC, while at the same time preserving the final authority of the UNMEE Force Commander in priority-setting and tasking.

This innovative approach included creative steps such as the relocation of the Peacekeeping Force, the Mine Awareness Cell and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Officer, and the U.N. Military Observers’ Mine Risk Education Cell to the MACC compound, where these elements were combined with elements of the MACC Operations Section to form the Force Mine Action Center (FMAC). The approach included the establishment of an EOD emergency response team to conduct training for the Peacekeeping Force EOD assets and to respond to major emergency tasks within the TSZ. The approach created two MACC Regional Liaison Officers in the Western and Central Sectors and formed two emergency MRE teams, which were immediately deployed to the sectors to conduct work with the Force Mine Action operational elements working in those sectors.

As a result of the new work plan, a further important achievement of the MACC was the establishment of a Demining Coordination Center in Shilalo in Sector West for the purpose of centralizing and improving all operational, monitoring and training activities of the Peacekeeping demining assets in the field.

The revised MACC work plan significantly changed the scope of activities of the MACC. The MACC now focused its attention strictly on its mandated responsibilities, namely coordinating all demining assets of the mission so as to best support the security, safety and mobility of the

## Aqa: Mine Action: Success and Challenges

Peacekeeping Force elements on the ground. The new MACC work plan was a creative and appropriate response to the unexpected and drastic decisions of the Eritrean government in mid-2002. In fact, the work plan resulted in increased efficiency of UNMEE MACC operations by integrating military demining assets into a civilian-run mine action center.<sup>8</sup> In this new capacity, the UNMEE MACC became the first-ever integrated civilian and military mine action coordination headquarters within a U.N. peacekeeping structure. The success of this creation culminated in the UNMEE MACC winning a U.N. 21 Award for “outstanding team productivity” in 2003—one year after the events of 2002.

Since fall 2002, demining assets of the MACC and the Peacekeeping Force have cleared more than 3 million square meters (1.16 square miles) of land and 1,116 kilometers (693.45 miles) of roads. These same assets have also disposed of more than 1,400 mines and 18,000 items of UXO. These are remarkable achievements in view of the functional difficulties that the MACC had to face and resolve in mid-2002, only two years after starting operations in Eritrea.

## Lessons Learned

Today, the U.N. mine action community has learned through the experience of the MACC in Eritrea that it is absolutely critical that complete clarity in roles and responsibilities of a mine action coordination center—especially roles lying outside traditional force support functions—must be established from the onset of a center’s operation through a comprehensive and official agreement at the highest levels. While the MACC’s initial attempt to reach out to the national authorities’ request to assist with national mine action capacity building was commendable, it must be kept in mind that capacity development support by an entity closely associated with peacekeeping forces is not automatically acceptable to local authorities and should be undertaken with caution. These are indeed accepted lessons learned; however, at the same time, the experience of the MACC in Eritrea in 2000 and in mid-2002 also highlights the importance of strong leadership that is capable of finding and applying innovative and practical approaches in situations for which template solutions do not exist. ♦

*See “References and Endnotes” on page 105*

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## » UNDP, continued from page 13

staff are rightly moving on to allow “new blood” to play an active role, others are believed to have reduced their engagement because they feel they have achieved their own objectives with respect to landmines. Whatever the reason, the fact is that the main strength of the ICBL has always been its network of well-coordinated national campaigns and committed individuals, particularly landmine survivors. It is critical that the national campaigns continue and strengthen their efforts to see an end to the problem of landmines and ERW. Some national campaigns in mine-affected countries do need modest financial assistance to survive. Investing in national campaigns is critical to maintain public support and to ensure compliance, universalization of international legal instruments, and effective mine action.

## Conclusion

While excellent progress has been made, landmines and ERW continue to hinder development and destroy lives and communities. Momentum must be maintained to address this problem. Increased resources, strategic targeting, more practical donor coordination as well as national commitment, leadership, and ownership are key to ensuring program effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

Mine action is not necessarily an end in itself, but a means to reduce human suffering and to achieve the MDGs. Mine action has made a major contribution to these goals and has even greater potential to help the international community reach our shared objectives of human security and development. Such excellent cooperation among governments, the United Nations, and NGOs can serve as a model for other areas of international cooperation. Practical mechanisms, tools, and procedures have been developed that can be adapted to other sectors.

Great initiatives bringing positive change need not necessarily come out of highly sophisticated analysis. Experiences from remote villages such as those in Chamkani and visionaries such as Rae McGrath and Bobby Muller have made a tremendous difference. Yet there is still a need to convince decision-makers that mine action is a development issue, just as was done almost 20 years ago to complete the Jani Khail road and Chamkani irrigation canal in Afghanistan. ♦

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