

# REFLECTING ON 10 Years of RONCO Operations IN MINE ACTION

by John Lundberg [ RONCO Consulting Corporation ]

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Ten years ago, RONCO was carrying out mine action operations in five countries: Angola, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Mozambique and Rwanda. Today, the company has over 200 demining-related projects in its portfolio, has worked in almost 30 countries, and has emerged as a world leader in landmine and

UXO removal. While the underlying

principle of RONCO's work remains the same—building local capacity by training, mentoring and overseeing host-nation organizations—its methodology and the environments in which it is asked to operate have changed considerably.

While manual deminers in the past had primarily operated independently, the integration of manual, mine detection dog (MDD) and mechanical demining assets is now the norm. In addition to demining, RONCO now conducts explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) in support of stockpile reduction, works closely with military elements, and, in the case of the U.S. Department of State's Quick Reaction Demining Force (QRDF), provides the first-ever worldwide demining and UXO rapid-response capability for the U.S. government. The environments in which RONCO operates have also changed; the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, have called for adapting operations to an environment in which insurgent activity poses a more severe threat than landmines.

## Integrating Operations

Over the past decade, RONCO has learned to integrate its manual, MDD and mechanical clearance assets whenever possible to maximize pro-

ductivity and safety. MDDs in particular have become a much more prevalent demining tool for the company worldwide. RONCO MDD teams can clear an area at more than 10 times the rate of a manual demining team, and can do it more safely and thoroughly than manual deminers alone. During a six-month span in 2004, for example, combined manual/MDD operations in Eritrea cleared more than 1 million square meters (0.39 square mile) of minefields without a single serious incident. Since 2001, 4 million square meters (1.54 square miles) of land have been cleared, directly benefiting over 7,000 Eritrean villagers.

Using mechanical means for vegetation clearance prior to manual/MDD operations further improves efficiency, as machines not only leave behind easier terrain for deminers and MDDs, but usually detonate anti-personnel mines as well. In Lebanon, a flail team precedes the MDD and Manual Demining Teams to all locations with great success. Combined manual/MDD/mechanical operations in a Lebanese village, for example, allowed the construction of a water reservoir benefiting over 30,000 people.

## Developing an Enhanced EOD Capability

In recent years, there has been an increasing need for an EOD capability beyond what is required during clearance operations. In places like Afghanistan and Nigeria, weapon caches and ammunition storage points and bunkers, many of which contain large stores of landmines, pose a risk to national security and the local population and need to be destroyed.

**EOD in Afghanistan.** In the aftermath of *Operation Enduring Freedom*, securing stores of ammunition has been a high priority for Afghan and U.S. forces. Ammunition stores attract both insurgents wanting to steal the ordnance to make explosive devices and locals collecting the scrap metal to sell. In response, RONCO has provided Afghanistan (primarily the Demining Agency for

Afghanistan [DAFA]) with demining elements, like enhanced EOD training. The new EOD teams, composed primarily of Afghan nationals, have been working for more than a year in clearing up strike areas and ammunition dumps for the U.S. State Department and the Afghan government.

In late 2003, the U.S. State Department also funded RONCO to train five specialized EOD teams to clean up areas with an especially high concentration of UXO or abandoned ammunition. When the coalition airfield at Kandahar came under numerous rocket attacks in early 2004, regional authorities requested RONCO deploy its teams to clear up munitions sites in the area surrounding the base. Clearance operations lasted five months, and since their completion, there have been no significant rocket attacks. RONCO-led teams destroyed 1,624,063 items of UXO, 2,130 metric tons (2,347.92 U.S. tons) of small arms ammunition and 1,466 weapons in 2004 alone.

**EOD in Nigeria.** In early 2001, a more urgent, short-term operation on behalf of the U.S. State Department took place in Nigeria, where an explosion of improperly stored munitions at a military facility killed over 1,000 people and scattered lethal ordnance over a broad area in Lagos, one of the world's largest cities. Following emergency response by U.S. European Command forces, RONCO deployed 40 of its personnel (primarily Mozambicans) to the city. RONCO's clearance tasks focused primarily on apartments, schools and residences, with the goals of ensuring the safety of displaced people returning to their neighborhoods and aiding in the reconstruction of damaged homes and buildings.

Overall, RONCO's EOD teams were highly productive, disposing of over 200,000 items of live ordnance on over 190,000 square meters (0.07 square mile) of land and clearing 454 apartments, 152 schoolrooms and 23 other buildings. RONCO also helped create the capacity to

*RONCO deminers walk the safe lane through a minefield.*



respond to future threats, establishing a training program on-site for Nigerian officers and senior enlisted personnel.

## Working Closely With Military Elements

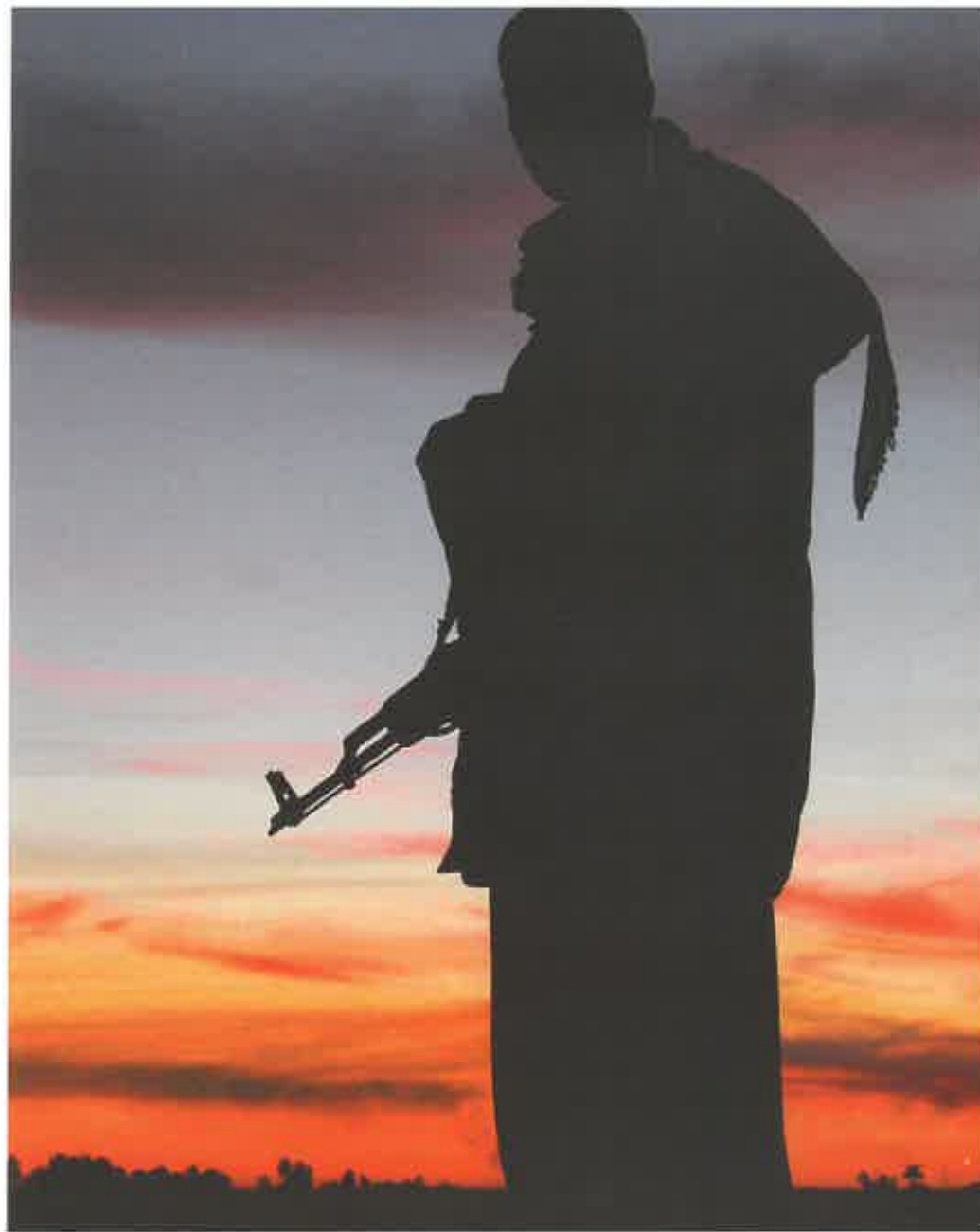
As U.S. and Coalition military forces have been tasked to maintain a presence in hostile environments like Iraq and Afghanistan, the need for cooperation between commercial demining and military elements has grown more evident. An extended operation in an environment like Iraq requires operations that the military is generally not called upon to carry out as clearance of a mine- or UXO-affected area has not historically been identified as one of the traditional U.S. military warfighting capabilities. U.S. Army countermine doctrine reflects a combat role that emphasizes breaching or bypassing a minefield rather than clearing it to be mine-free.

The impact of these differing doctrines was evident at the start of *Operation Enduring Freedom*, when a number of unfortunate accidents occurred as military personnel stationed at Bagram and Kandahar air bases attempted to clear extensive minefields and UXO. In early 2002, the U.S. Department of State tasked RONCO with providing resources to work with the assigned engineering battalions in clearing the bases. RONCO has since cleared over 7 million square meters (2.70 square miles) at Bagram and Kandahar, and has gone on to clear several other installations for the Afghan army. Based on its closely integrated operations with the U.S. Army, RONCO was also tasked with developing and training the first MDD teams deployed in the U.S. Army since Vietnam. Currently, there are 12 military dog-handler teams working in Afghanistan.

## Developing a Rapid-Response Capability

In 2001, RONCO developed the QRDF, based in Beira, Mozambique, to provide a worldwide rapid-response capability for the U.S. Department of State. The force, consisting of four teams of 10 manual deminers and eight MDDs, is capable of deploying within one week of receiving a warning order. To date, the force has deployed four times—to Sri Lanka twice, to Sudan, and most recently, to Iraq. The QRDF's success depends largely on its experience. Its staff of deminers, dog handlers, team leaders and management is comprised of long-standing RONCO employees, many of whom were initially trained by RONCO in the early 1990s in Mozambique.

When the QRDF was tasked to deploy to Iraq, RONCO moved 60 men, eight MDDs, and eight tons of equipment over 8,000 miles to the newly reopened Baghdad International Airport, all in a 36-hour period. RONCO's chartered plane was only the third civilian aircraft to land at the airport following its reopening. Within three days, the QRDF began battlefield area clearance and demining tasks, and in four months, the force



*A RONCO sentry keeps watch in Iraq.*

cleared nearly 1.2 million square meters (0.46 square mile) of land and found and destroyed over 2,000 mines and other items of UXO. Along with the clearance of UXO and cluster munitions in and around Baghdad, the QRDF cleared minefields along the main highway from Basra to Baghdad, including the first minefield to be cleared in post-war Iraq. Additional QRDF clearance tasks included areas around the Ministry of Electricity in Baghdad and along the paths of two power lines leading to the city, enabling the repair of power pylons and helping to restore electricity. The force even drew the attention of local farmers, who requested that their fields be included in the clearance.

## Establishing Post-Conflict Demining Strategies

**Afghanistan.** Much of RONCO's work in Afghanistan after *Operation Enduring Freedom* focused on developing a national demining strat-

egy and improving national capabilities. When it was given this task, RONCO chose not to implement sweeping changes and instead worked to improve pre-existing Afghan demining elements, coordinating their work and bringing them up to the level of the International Mine Action Standards. This effort has been of critical importance, as some of the richest land in the country is located on the former Taliban/Northern Alliance fighting line and was some of the most heavily mined land in the world. According to the United Nations, RONCO's improvement efforts proved successful, and DAFA, once considered the least effective of the Afghan demining organizations, became in many ways the most effective. RONCO also worked with the Afghan Mine Dog Center to improve its MDD abilities and prioritize clearance tasks.

A key aspect of improving Afghan national performance has been the improvement of survey capabilities. As late as 2002, the Afghans used a



PHOTO COURTESY OF RONCO

A RONCO EOD team conducts demolitions near Basra, Iraq.

homegrown version of a survey that was accurate enough to direct someone to a minefield, but fell short of international standards. While simplistic, this improvised survey capability actually worked quite well, and individual maps could be rather impressive. Once the technology for a survey that included a global positioning system element and would comport to Information Management System for Mine Action standards became available, though, its implementation became a priority. Although implementing such a system has been impacted by a shortage of Afghan engineers, national survey capabilities are making good progress.

**Iraq.** After the initial QRDF tasking in Iraq, RONCO's efforts focused on developing a national capacity in the country. This task has proven particularly challenging since humanitarian landmine/UXO clearance was never a priority of the Saddam Hussein regime; a demining infrastructure had to be built up from scratch and government personnel had to be convinced of the effort's importance. The proliferation of mine action organizations entering Iraq after the war presented RONCO with another challenge: helping the interim government organize the various national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), commercial companies, and military units into one coordinated effort. To this end and on behalf of the U.S. Department of State, RONCO helped develop the National Mine Action Authority within the Iraqi Ministry of Planning. This organization has since developed national mine action standards, accredited all mine action organizations in Iraq, created a national mine action strategy, and drafted a national budget and work plans.

## Conclusion

RONCO's experience over the last decade highlights changes and developments in the field of humanitarian demining. Once manual deminers were the principal capability; however, fully integrated MDD, mechanical and manual demining capabilities are now imperative. While standards were once variable and incomplete, the IMAS are now the operating environment. While humanitarian demining and mine clearing were once considered separate missions and doctrines, RONCO's experience in Afghanistan now shows that they are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. While humanitarian responses once took time to organize and deploy, the QRDF has demonstrated the impact and usefulness of a highly trained rapid-reaction force. And, while humanitarian demining was once strictly a peacetime endeavor, Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated that such operations will sometimes have to take place in dangerous and even hostile environments. Throughout its experiences, RONCO has demonstrated that governments, international organizations, private companies and NGOs can cooperate, learn from each other, and coordinate their efforts to better ensure a future free from the scourge of landmines. ♦

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public education with respect to the dangers of undiscovered mines. Ideally, all citizens will be able to react and initiate a successful response through established governmental structures. Coordination remains vital even with the much-reduced mine action requirement at end-state and needs to be accounted for within the normal government coordination mechanism and structure.

A key element in the successful implementation of an ESS and the long- and medium-term plans for implementing it will be the successful training of personnel at all levels. This training will include not only the technical field level, but program and project management skills along with careful computational-backed administration and records keeping, budgeting and financial administration, and other essential elements of modern management and administration.

Program achievements will require continued successful interface with all of its donors, which requires a strong public-relations capability. While the local language is essential for most operations and for communicating with the various government agencies and authorities, all aspects of the program must be capable of being communicated to the international community. ♦

See "References and Endnotes" on page 104

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cleared and 1,400 items of UXO were destroyed that year. In July 2004, in compliance with the requests from the government of Azerbaijan and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Oil Pipe Line Company, ANAMA began surface and sub-surface UXO clearance operations on the main oil pipeline route in Agstafa district. A part of the BTC pipeline crosses a UXO-contaminated area in Saloglu village that is located in close vicinity to former Soviet army ammunition warehouses. Clearance operations were carried out on a 32-kilometre-long (19.88 miles) route that was 60 metres (0.04 mile) wide. The project was completed at the end of August 2004 and 121 items of UXO were found on the depth of up to 3 metres (3.28 yards) and destroyed. ♦

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