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RONCO-TRAINED SRI LANKAN ARMY DEMINEING TEAMS RESPOND TO *Post-Tsunami* CLEARANCE TASKS



by Stacy L. Smith
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Introduction

In the early morning of December 26, 2004, a powerful tsunami hit the eastern seaboard of Sri Lanka, devastating fishing communities lining the shore, and impacting villages as far as 1 kilometer (0.62 mile) inland. Within days of the catastrophic event, reports reminiscent of the migrating mine situation in Central America following Hurricane Mitch surfaced. As in Honduras in 1998, the possibility of displaced mines and other hazardous ordnance posed a threat to the local population and to emergency relief workers moving into the region to bring supplies and rebuild vital infrastructure. The mine action community in Sri Lanka responded swiftly and cooperatively to determine the accuracy of the reports, assess the scope of the problem, and coordinate its response. As key players in this response, the Sri Lankan army (SLA) demining regiments, which were trained by RONCO Consulting Corporation in 2003–2004 and operate under RONCO's oversight today (under contract to the U.S. Department of State's Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement), participated in the survey of reported displaced mines. The SLA also conducted emergency clearance tasks in the vicinity of several naval bases where mines protecting the perimeters had migrated into nearby villages.

Developing Sri Lanka's Demining Capacity

In 2003, RONCO developed the Sri Lankan demining capacity through intensive training with the first of three classes of manual deminers and ongoing technical oversight during their deployments to clearance tasks. Since August 2003, the total number of deminers, supervisors and medics trained by RONCO under U.S. assistance has risen to 40 officers, 42 senior non-commissioned officers/instructors, 280 manual deminers and 35 medics. With this capacity, the

A landmine warning sign is posted where an elderly Tamil villager takes water from an area flooded by the December 2004 tsunami in the coastal village of Thalanyaddi, just north of Kilinochchi, Sri Lanka.

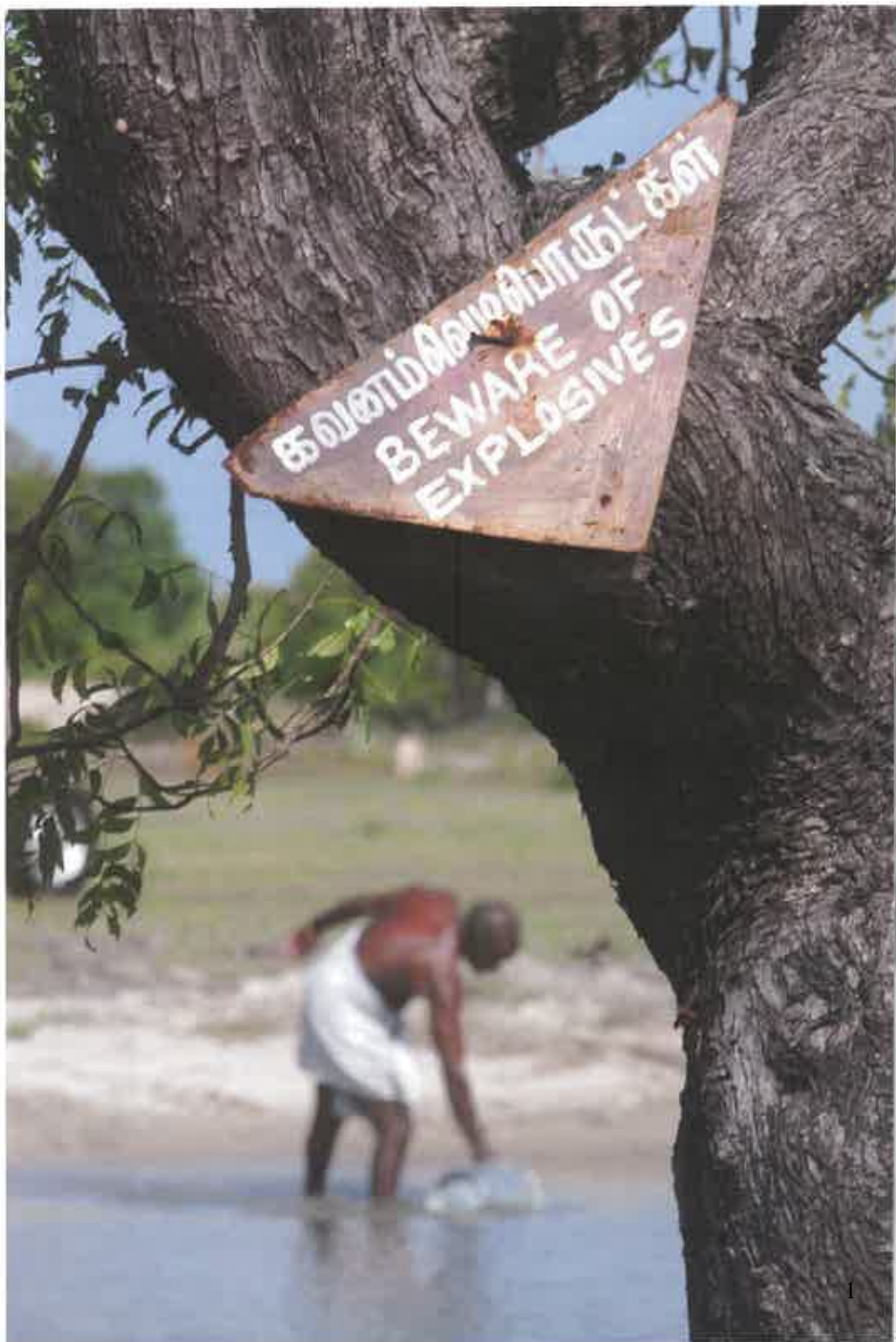


PHOTO COURTESY OF AP



RONCO-advised SLA demining teams clear mines near the shore.

SLA was prepared to respond to emergency clearance tasks following the tsunami with efficiency, professionalism, and above all, attention to safety standards. To date, the teams have cleared over 3 million square meters (1.16 square miles) of land, destroying more than 5,000 mines, including some 2,000 mines recovered over the first two months of post-tsunami operations.

Responding to the Tsunami

The District Mine Action Office (DMAO) in Sri Lanka, which had been established to prioritize and assign clearance taskings, quickly investigated reports of displaced and migrating mines after the tsunami. Over the six-day investigation, the DMAO verified reports of three type-72 AP mines among the debris of destroyed beachfront houses in Point Pedro; two 60-mm mortars were found in washed-away transit cases from an ammunition supply point that resurfaced in Point Pedro; two P4 AP mines were located 50 meters (54.68 yards) east of a naval base off the coast of Jaffna; and one additional AP mine of unknown type was found by a fisherman off the northeast coast of Jaffna. Teams from the SLA and HALO Trust coordinated efforts to address these initial cases of migrating mines and UXO.

As a result of the survey, the SLA and DMAO determined that mine migration would not pose a significant threat to relief workers operating in the region; however, workers were urged to follow precautionary mine risk warning messages that were distributed and broadcast by the Sri Lankan authorities. Though there were few instances of migrating mines in other regions of Sri Lanka, reports of mine movement near naval bases were further investigated and resulted in emergency marking and clearance tasks.

After the survey, demining teams quickly began to clear areas near villages and restore fencing to prevent villagers from gaining access to the mine-contaminated land. On December 31,

2004, SLA deminers began minefield marking in Manalkadu and on Karainagar Island, where mines protecting the perimeter of naval bases were completely swept away. At Kuchchavelli Naval Camp, landmines around the perimeter of the base shifted into the camp itself and drifted into a village located approximately 500 meters (0.31 mile) from the coastline. Initial estimates indicated that the minefield contained about 800 mines, but more mines were later found in outlying areas.

In January 2005, the SLA deployed several teams of trained deminers, advised by RONCO, to respond to emergency clearance tasks in and around the naval installations in the affected areas of Trincomalee, Kuchchavelli, Batticaloa, Kallady and Siththandy. In Trincomalee and Batticaloa, the SLA worked with Danish Demining Group and Mines Advisory Group (MAG) respectively, to prevent further shifting of mines. In both cases, the military deminers cleared inside the camps while the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) cleared outside the camps. Cooperation between the SLA demining teams and the NGOs resulted in a swift and effective operation.

In Kuchchavelli, SLA deminers conducted an emergency clearance task to recover mines from a protective minefield surrounding the washed-away military camp. By the end of February, 57,230 square meters (0.02 square mile) of land had been cleared during battle area clearance and demining operations at the site. Roughly 1,370 mines were recovered. Future completion of this continuing task will allow nearly 85 families in the nearby village to access their agri-

cultural land and water supplies in order to begin reconstruction efforts and resume trade in the region.

Emergency clearance was also conducted in Kallady and Siththandy, where approximately 175 families reside. The SLA deminers, working with MAG, cleared 89,950 square meters (0.03 square mile) of land in Kallady, removing 108 mines and four items of UXO. In Siththandy, teams recovered over 500 mines on a 4,500-square-meter (5,381.96-square-yard) parcel of land. Although the mines were contained in this small area, they still posed a risk to local villagers and prevented the villagers from accessing medical and water supplies. Additionally, the presence of these mines restricted the reconstruction effort in the village, which clearly required the well-coordinated response of the SLA.

Assessing the SLA Demining Capability

Because of the SLA's growing demining expertise, which was developed and refined over the past year and a half under the instruction of RONCO's in-country technical advisers, emergency demining, routine demining and clearance tasks have been promptly undertaken, enabling families to return to lands from which they were previously displaced and begin rebuilding their villages without the fear of mines. The SLA teams—having largely completed the emergency clearance tasks following the tsunami—continue to work on other high-priority areas, clearing land that will be used for resettlement of families, small-scale agricultural production, and the rebuilding of vital infrastructure. The SLA demining teams' ability to work closely with other international demining organizations during these tasks demonstrates their capabilities to work and maintain international standards. ♦

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SLA deminers learn to use mine detectors during training for clearance operations.

