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by Charlotte Dombrower, Mine Action Information Center

Afghanistan is one of the most heavily mine-infested countries in the world. During a 10-year occupation beginning in 1979 followed by years of internal warfare, landmines were planted throughout the country. The most heavily impacted areas are near the borders of Pakistan and Iran. Following the Soviet occupation, over 800 square kilometers (308.88 square miles) were contaminated with landmines. The exact number of mines plaguing the country is unknown, as minefield records are still incomplete. With such a vast problem, there was an immense need for action. In 1989, a mine action program was developed that would later become one of the world's most successful mine action organizations: the Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan (MAPA).

Background

During the 1970s, Afghanistan experienced governmental instability. Internal warfare followed a coup in 1973 when the monarchy was overthrown. Beginning in 1979, the Soviet Union occupied the country, resulting in a 10-year war between the Soviet government and Mujahedeen rebels. Soviet forces withdrew in 1989, but what remained was a poverty-stricken country contaminated with landmines and UXO. The mines were spread over every type of terrain, ranging from agricultural fields and residential areas to major cities.

After Afghanistan was freed from Soviet occupation, a civil war took place as rival groups fought to gain power and control over their land. At this time, more landmines were planted by the Northern Alliance, the Taliban and al-Qaida, intensifying the landmine situation. During the civil war, "most educated people had left the country," says Abdul Sattar, the director of Demining Agency for Afghanistan (DAFA).

"Now that we have peace in our country, they are willing to return. They have come in masses and they are building houses. We suspect that there are mines [where they] built their houses, in their irrigation canals." Returning refugees are at great risk for landmine injuries, as almost anywhere they choose to settle is likely contaminated by landmines.

Establishing the Roots of Mine Action

According to the *Guide to Mine Action*, the roots of mine action itself stem from Afghanistan.¹ In 1988, the United Nations appealed for funds to address the landmine problem in Afghanistan. Up to that point, countries had relied on military forces to clear mines, but Afghanistan did not have its own army—not to mention its own government—to take on this role. Consequently, "humanitarian demining" was born, and the United Nations took action through mine risk education (MRE), victim assistance and general mine clearing.¹ After the United Nations conducted a two-week training session with assistance from donor countries, a mine action program was under way. The United Nations then decided to help develop a number of Afghan non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that would implement mine clearance, mine mapping, marking, surveying and mine awareness programs in the country.

At first, it was difficult to recruit deminers into the mine action program because most people knew so little about it. Sattar explains that he got involved with mine action in 1993 because he thought, "This was a humble job. [Mines] cannot recognize innocent people; they cannot recognize women and children." He felt it was his duty to "serve [his] people and [his] country." Most mine workers in Afghanistan went into the field of mine action unaware of the caliber of the land-

mine problem, but they quickly learned. "We never dreamed that our country would have more mines than our population," Sattar says, adding, "Now we fully understand the problem of our people and [the] land on which we live."

Following the Soviet withdrawal, RONCO Consulting Corporation, supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development/Pakistan, successfully obtained a contribution of mine detection dogs (MDDs) to the Afghan reconstruction effort from the Thai government. According to Stephen J. Edelmann, RONCO president, his staff "soon began adapting the explosives detection technology to the detection of buried landmines and UXO, resulting in the deployment of the first MDDs. It was at that time, in support of Afghan reconstruction, that RONCO began expanding its activities into demining and the removal of UXO," he says.

MAPA

The new mine action concept was first implemented through the U.N.-established MAPA founded in 1989. Operating under the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA), MAPA is responsible for overseeing all mine action centers and NGOs in Afghanistan. This organizational strategy creates one effective and successful program, rather than many organizations with overlapping objectives. MAPA consists of six mine action centers—the U.N. Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan (MACA) and five Regional Mine Action Centres (RMACs)—located throughout the country, along with 15 local NGOs. Organized by UNOCHA, the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Mine Action Service, MAPA was designed to cover all areas of mine action, designating different responsibilities to different organizations. The overseeing organizations mandated that all mine action activities would be planned by MACA and MCPA. Their responsibilities would include planning mine action strategies, producing a set of mine action standards and policies, implementing mine action programs, and supporting field training, etc. The responsibilities of MAPA were divided into four categories: survey operations, landmine and UXO clearance, quality assurance, and mine awareness. These objectives were then assigned to various organizations within the MAPA structure.

Survey Operations. Survey operations have been allocated to MACA, MCPA, the Mine Dog Center (MDC), HALO Trust and Danish Demining Group (DDG). Their responsibilities include identifying, mapping and marking suspected mine-affected areas. In 1990, the first survey was conducted in Afghanistan by Mines Advisory Group (MAG), a British NGO. MCPA then took over in 1993 by conducting a general survey of Afghanistan's landmine and UXO situation. MCPA continues to update and reassess its survey results. Together with HALO Trust, MCPA has surveyed over 383 million square

meters (147.88 square miles) of mine-affected areas. In June 2003, the new Retrofit Landmine Impact Survey of Afghanistan was introduced; it was executed by the Survey Action Centre (SAC) and implemented by MCPA. Funded by the European Commission (EC) and the governments of Canada and Germany, the main objective of the survey was to produce "a new, more accurate picture of the impact of mines and unexploded ordnance."²

Landmine and UXO clearance. A number of organizations under MAPA have implemented landmine clearance activities, including the Agency for Rehabilitation and Energy Conservation in Afghanistan (AREA), Afghan Technical Consultants (ATC), RONCO, DAFA, DDG, HALO Trust, MDC, Handicap International (HI) and the Organization for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR). These organizations are responsible for clearing high-priority areas, which include areas where rehabilitation will begin immediately after clearance or where casualties are occurring at a high rate.

RONCO's Stephen Edelmann says, "Being one of the most fought-over countries in recent history, Afghanistan's UXO problem is probably even greater than its landmine problem, which is severe. ... In the course of clearing well over 7 million square meters [2.70 square miles] of land to date in support of the Department of Defense, for example, our clearance teams have, in fact, encountered many more UXO than landmines."

Quality assurance. Quality assurance is the process used to evaluate MAPA's mine action activities, making sure that they are safe, worthwhile and cost-effective. MAPA has designated the Monitoring, Evaluation and Training Agency (META) to perform these duties. Working closely with DDG and MDC to make sure personnel are properly trained and managed, META has facilitated over 1,400 training courses for technical demining as well as 10 managers' courses since its inception in 1997.

Mine awareness. The mine awareness program in Afghanistan strives to reduce and prevent casualties through MRE and training. The organizations responsible for MRE in Afghanistan are the Ansar Relief Institute, the Afghan Red Crescent Society, AREA, the British Broadcasting Corporation/Afghan Education Program, the United Nations Children's Fund, HALO Trust, HI, META, OMAR and Save the Children USA. According to the 2004 *Landmine Monitor*, these organizations have reached over 10.6 million people through their MRE programs since 1990. The programs originally sought to educate refugees who resettled in heavily mined organizations. In recent years, though, their focus has shifted to community-based components, aimed at public organizations such as schools, hospitals and religious institutions.

Recent Changes

MAPA and its partners have been extremely effective in their mine action strategy. The demining

workforce has grown to almost 7,000 personnel. Since 1989, over 289 million square meters (111.58 square meters) of mined land and 522 million square meters (201.55 square miles) of battle land have been cleared, with 250,000 landmines and 3.3 million items of UXO destroyed in the process. While the program had overall success for 12 straight years, the U.S./Coalition invasion following the 9/11 terrorist attacks halted the progress of mine action. The United States and other Coalition Forces made numerous military assaults on Taliban and al-Qaida forces in Afghanistan using ordnance and air strikes, while new mines were laid by the Northern Alliance, the Taliban and al-Qaida.

Strict security in the country plagued deminers as they often ran into conflicts with the U.N.-controlled International Security Assistance Force. "The security environment within which the program now operates has had a detrimental effect on clearance and risk education activities," says Patrick Fruchet of MACA.³ According to Fruchet, over 50 incidents have occurred between guards and demining teams in the last two years, including one in which security guards shot and killed four deminers. MAPA was forced to largely reduce and even suspend its demining activities in the heavily guarded provinces. Mine action funding dwindled, and it seemed as if mine action efforts would end in Afghanistan.

The U.S.-led military intervention resulted in the end of Taliban rule. Subsequently, a centralized government for Afghanistan was established, which proved to be beneficial for mine action in the country. This new government signed the Ottawa Convention in March 2003, allowing MAPA to create a 10-year work plan, implementing deadlines and goals for achieving mine clearance and eventually, a mine-safe country. The new government also meant instead of MAPA being led by the United Nations, it would now be under the control of the national administration.

Conclusion

Although mines planted post-9/11 proved to be a major setback for MAPA, recently increased funds helped to improve resources, equipment and personnel. In 2003, the number of personnel employed almost doubled to 8,000 people and the budget was increased to over \$60 million (U.S.) per year. The boost in funds allowed a number of new initiatives to be created such as the Mine Action for Peace Initiative, which focused on the reintegration of former fighters

into the community. Despite tragedy, internal warfare and international conflict, the country of Afghanistan does not waver in its fight against mine infestation. "Within the past year, RONCO—under the auspices of both the Department of State and Defense—has established and trained teams of Afghan clearance and EOD personnel to dispose of large numbers of stockpiled weapons and munitions, denying them to wrongdoers and, in fact, helping to reduce the future UXO problem in Afghanistan," says Edelmann. With one of the strongest mine action programs in the world, increased funds and a new government, Afghans can begin to rebuild and rehabilitate their lives because the mine-affected areas in the country are being cleared.

See "References and Endnotes" on page 105



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