Operation Emirates Solidarity: an International Model and Mine Clearance Success Story

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Background

Landmines and unexploded munitions remaining from the 22-year Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, as well as previous periods of conflict in the area, severely hindered the much-needed restoration of peace and security in the area. Reconstruction, socio-economic development and general community life were severely affected by the massive landmine contamination left following the Israeli withdrawal in 2000.

While the majority of these mines lie in the immediate area of the United Nations-delineated "Blue Line" between Lebanon and Israel, the greatest impact was located in the inhabited areas of Bint Jbeil, Nabatieh and Marjayoun districts. Many of the occupants of the villages in these areas left during the occupation and were soon confronted with the estimated 500,000 landmines and booby traps denying them safe return to their houses and land.

Following requests from both the government of Lebanon (GoL) and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for support to mine action in southern Lebanon, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), working in partnership with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), quickly established a Mine Action Coordination Centre (MACC) in July 2000 with funding support from France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom. Shortly after the MACC was set up, the Israelis provided records and maps relating to 308 minefields and 288 booby-trap areas, containing 43,593 landmines and impacting an area of 155 square kilometres. This information was quickly analysed and provided the basis for an initial threat assessment and overview of the scope of the problem.

In early 2001, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced its assistance to mine clearing in the former occupied south. The project was named Operation Emirates Solidarity (OES) and is funded through the generosity of the UAE President, His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nhayyan. The operation is conducted in partnership with the United Nations and the GoL.

The existing UN MACC was expanded into a tri-partite structure incorporating elements from the United Nations, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the UAE. The role of MACC Southern Lebanon (MACC SL) is to provide a planning, coordination and quality assurance capability that ensures landmine and UXO clearance is done in the most effective, safe and time-efficient manner, and that is conducted in accordance with internationally recognized humanitarian mine action standards.

Operation Emirates Solidarity

The scope of the UAE offer was to clear landmines, UXO and booby traps throughout the former Israeli-occupied area of southern Lebanon. However, once the prevailing political and military situation in the region was considered, this was later amended to exclude those border minefields lying along or adjacent to the Blue Line, and the following phased approach was adopted for OES:

- **Phase 1** was designed to quickly locate and clear all of the Israeli-reported booby traps throughout the area and was completed in May 2002.
- **Phase 2** was the systematic clearance of the mine/UXO threat throughout four geographical sub areas known as OES 1–4. This commenced in May 2002, scheduled to be completed within two years and was in fact completed in August 2003.
- **Phase 3** was the addition of a fifth geographical sub-area known as OES 5. Clearance there commenced in June 2003 and was completed in May 2004.

The UAE laid down three essential objectives to be accomplished through OES:

1. The safe and timely return of contaminated land to the people of southern Lebanon
2. Best practice demining to International Mine Action Standards (IMAS)
3. Value for aid

In addition, both the UAE and GoL had supplementary objectives, including to enhance their national capabilities in humanitarian demining and the management of mine action through placing selected individuals to work alongside the experienced UN staff of MACC SL and the mine/UXO clearance organizations. The operational objective of OES and the MACC SL was to achieve "mine-safe" status throughout the OES area within two years.

During OES/Phase 2, the UAE bilaterally contracted two firms to carry out the mine clearance of OES Areas 1–4, MineTech and BACTEC. In addition, the UAE had several of its own demining teams trained and accredited in southern Lebanon who then worked on various tasks under OES. As well as providing seven officers to work within the MACC SL, the LAF also contributed a 10-man demining team. This team was trained and equipped as part of OES and conducts Technical Survey and sampling tasks in support of OES/MACC SL Operations. Clearance of OES Areas 1–4 (Phase 2) minefields, originally projected to be complete by May 2004, was accomplished in August 2003, some nine months ahead of schedule.

A Community Liaison Team member along with the landowner and village head revisit a cleared area to conduct the Post-Clearance Review.

The Final Completion Certificates for MineTech and BACTEC were prepared, finalized and signed by the National Demining Office (NDO) in September 2003, and they confirm a total number of 34,862 anti-personnel mines, 1,533 anti-tank mines, and 3,261 items of UXO located and destroyed from minefields in these areas. This remarkable accomplishment resulted in over four million square metres of formerly mine-contaminated land being released back to the local communities during a 14-month clearance/operational period, thereby assisting a rapid return to normalcy in these former occupied areas and supporting regional stability and ongoing peace processes.

BACTEC commenced mine/UXO clearance operations in OES Area 5 on 28 June 2003, with a maximum time frame to completion of May 2004. Completion of these targets was achieved on 24 November 2003, with over 19,000 landmines located and destroyed resulting in some 500,000 square metres of contaminated land being released back to the local community.

As clearance through OES Area 5 progressed, there were a number of additional targets identified that posed a mine/UXO threat to the local community and therefore required clearance. To enable OES to achieve "mine safe" status in these areas, thereby achieving full closure, a complete and final "sweep-through" of the area was conducted. On completion of this "sweep-through" phase, clearance of all remaining mine-/UXO-contaminated areas within the OES area that presented an immediate humanitarian threat was completed.

Contributing Success Factors

This extraordinary achievement was made possible by the clear and sustained commitment of the UAE to set and achieve realistic goals in a set timeframe, the full cooperation

Each yellow picket indicates where a mine has been located and destroyed.

and partnership of the host government and its armed forces, and the quality assurance and technical monitoring of the MACC SL to ensure that all work was completed on time and to the internationally recognized standard.

As a result of the field experience and lessons learned by the UN MACC in Kosovo, the MACC SL developed a country-specific "clearance methodology" to rapidly achieve the required end-product while conforming to the nationally developed technical standards and guidelines developed from the IMAS. Although the clearance methodology was designed for dealing with "military-laid pattern" minefields, as the majority of minefields found in Lebanon are, it has been adapted and employed successfully against many "non-military" minefields. In essence, the known mine rows are located and manually demined according to laid down procedures; subsequently, an agreed and defined extended area is covered by mine detection dogs (MDDs) and/or mechanical flail.

Due to the extremely high concentrations of mines, neither MDDs nor mechanical flails are used as a primary clearance tool inside "military-pattern minefields." Within the known minefields, one can expect to locate an average of three to four anti-personnel mines per square metre and the presence of so many indications in a small area only confuses the MDD while mechanical flails proved to be unreliable against the predominate Israeli No4 AP mine. Once the first mine row is located by survey cut lanes, the location and clearance of the remaining mines is a straightforward process best handled by manual clearance teams.

This clearance methodology has been refined and proven over the two-year period starting May 2002, during which over 58,000 landmines from over 500 mined areas were successfully located and destroyed.

Quality Assurance

All clearance teams working within the OES area undergo a formal on-site assessment by the MACC SL prior to being issued an Operational Accreditation License by the NDO. The assessment is conducted under test conditions, on a training or simulated minefield, usually lasts approximately four hours, and confirms that clearance teams are appropriately equipped, trained, insured and supervised to conduct all aspects of demining both safely and effectively. MDD teams are also subject to accreditation and must demonstrate the clear ability to indicate all known mine types in south Lebanon.

Once accredited, all teams are subject to regular and routine external quality assurance (QA) visits from MACC SL. This monitoring capability is currently provided by ArmorGroup and the Swedish Rescue Services Agency (SRSA), under contract to UNOPS, and includes capacity to conduct QA sampling of cleared minefields if required.

Community Liaison

Throughout OES, MACC SL has fielded a Community Liaison Team. The team, comprising four national staff and two LAF soldiers, provides the link between the clearance operations and the local communities.

The principal role of the Community Liaison Team is to ensure that the user of the land is confident in its safety once the clearance process has been completed. This is achieved by communication with the village Moukthar, the landowner, and others living near the area. This communication is established before clearance takes place, and is maintained throughout the clearance period, until the day the clearance process is officially declared completed. On the day of the official completion, the landowner or the official representative for the land is walked over the area and shown the boundaries of the cleared area. This is not the last time that the Community Liaison Team member will meet with the landowner. Some months following this completion day, the Community Liaison Team member will again meet with the landowner to complete a post-clearance review of the cleared area.

The build-up of trust within the community also results in further information being relayed to the MACC SL on both known target areas as well as new suspected dangerous areas. The team has also established itself as the initial contact point for community sightings of UXO. When contacted, the team responds by completing a UXO Tasking Request that is then reviewed by MACC SL Operations and passed to the LAF Survey/EOD Team, who then either destroy it in situ, (generally on the same day) or remove the item to a central demolition site and destroy it.

Post-Clearance Review

To validate the mine/UXO clearance carried out so far through OES and to identify specific development needs of the mine-affected communities, MACC SL conducts a post-clearance review of all recently cleared minefields. The review is implemented with support from the Swiss government and seeks to answer the following questions:

- Are the landowners and community confident in the quality of the mine/UXO clearance?
- Is the former landmine-contaminated land now being used productively?
- If it is not, why not? This is specifically to identify small, easily realisable projects to support productive land usage.

The review has confirmed that the vast majority of landowners are satisfied that their land is now safe to use and are indeed using it. This level of confidence not only validates the overall OES concept but also illustrates the importance of a community liaison function integrated into the MACC SL structure and the operational methodology. Keeping community leaders and individual landowners informed and involved throughout the mine clearance process has ensured that landowners are confident in the finished product and has directly contributed to stability and post-conflict development.

Summary

Within a short, two-year period, against a backdrop of regional unrest and continued cross-border military activity, the significant and complex mine/UXO contamination problem within the former occupied areas of southern Lebanon has been brought under control, neutralized and now largely eliminated. This almost unprecedented achievement has been made possible by the sustained and committed funding of the UAE, the clear delineation of specific objectives and the timeframe to achieve them, and the full support and involvement of the host nation, through the participation of the armed forces and the management of their NDO, the technical advice and support from the United Nations, and the sheer hard work and flexibility of the clearance organizations.

**Photos c/o author.*

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