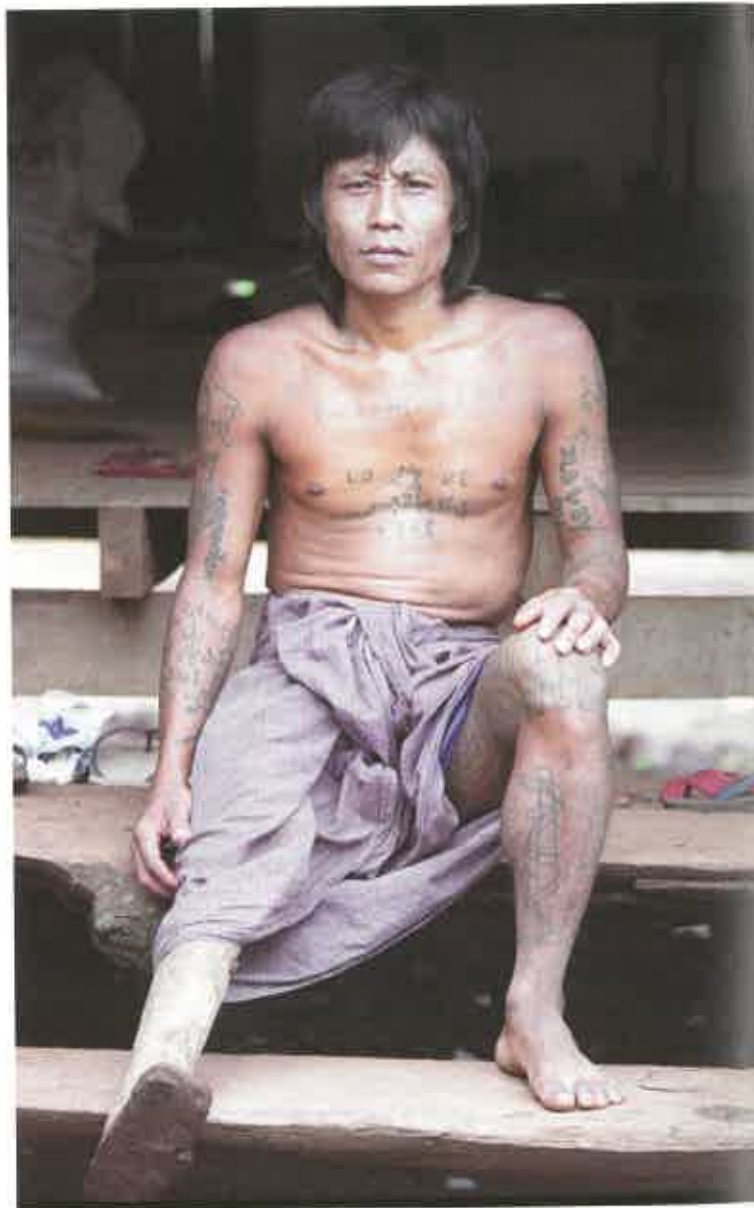


Mine Risk Education in Kawthoolei Liberated Area: An Experiment in Creating a Program of MRE in a Non-State-Controlled Area of Burma

Engaging a non-state armed group in any aspect of mine action is based on the same concerns of humanitarian action that are the basis of engaging any state authority, but more time may be needed to educate non-state groups in humanitarian norms to which they are unable to accede, and by which they may not feel bound.¹ Most non-state actors (NSAs) will engage in armed conflict. If the conflict is over, they have either dissolved or become a part of the official governing structure. If they are mine users, mine action will be similar to that undertaken in states that are not yet members of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty. We chose to approach the Karen National Union (KNU) of Burma because they were one of the key mine users, outside state forces, and the population of Karen (Kayin²) state was one of the most mine-affected. In short, it was where the need was the greatest.



Karen National Liberation Army soldier Maung Keat, 30, sits outside his jungle hut in New Marneplaw, Burma.

The Politics of MRE

Gaining the trust and understanding of the KNU required much time and many meetings. As a member of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), our organization was already known to the KNU as an advocate for non-use of anti-personnel landmines. The key concern of the leadership of the KNU was based on the fear that our program may be a covert attempt to create opposition to their policies within their own constituency. We had dual interests, which included advocating a halt in mine use by the KNU and its Karen National Liberation Army and determining if we could bring a mine risk education (MRE) program to people residing in areas under their control.

After negotiation and trust building, the KNU agreed that we could proceed with an MRE program as a necessary emergency public health alert, and we began looking for a partner within the NSA constituency with whom we could work.

Public Health as the Doorway to MRE in NSA-Controlled Areas

We already had a working relationship with Magsaysay Award-winner Dr. Cynthia Maung of the Mae Tao Clinic. As an ethnic Karen, she had strong links in the Thai/Burma border areas and introduced us to the Backpack Health Worker Teams (BPHWT), a cross-border health practitioner's organization that equipped people in the Karen and other ethnic minority areas of Burma with the skills to provide both medical care and public health education. We chose to work with the BPHWT as they had access to, and status in, the communities at risk as visiting public health professionals. Associating our program with existing public health programs also reassured the political leadership of the KNU that the MRE was a humanitarian rather than political project.

Project Preparation

We secured an adviser with years of experience in MRE. Our MRE program officer had received his background in MRE in Cambodia. Significant data regarding behav-

ior leading to landmine deaths and injuries and mine types encountered had already been collected through systematic interviews with landmine survivors in Burma by Nonviolence International during the previous four years. We launched our training program by using basic texts from Cambodia to begin co-construction of a new MRE curriculum together with our trainees. Our goal was to tap the knowledge base already existing in our trainees

Who are NSAs and why do we pursue mine action with them?

The majority of armed conflicts in the world today involve armed opposition groups acting autonomously from recognized governments. These groups, known as NSAs, include rebel groups, irregular armed groups, insurgents, dissident armed forces, guerrillas, liberation movements and de-facto territorial governing bodies. In ideology, objectives, strategies, form and level of organization, support-base, legitimacy, and degree of international recognition, NSAs vary greatly. Not all NSAs use landmines, but landmines are manufactured, used and stockpiled by NSAs in many conflicts around the world. NSAs may have de-facto control over mined land. The people in whose names they wage armed struggle may face a serious landmine problem. The Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Treaty is only a standard for states. NSAs must be engaged independently to achieve a universal ban on anti-personnel landmines, assist victims and clear mined areas.

-ICBL NSA Working Group
www.icbl.org/insg

in order to create a MRE curriculum that would be appropriate to the situation on the ground in Karen state. We also created the curriculum in this manner to instill in our trainees the idea that MRE is a co-created program, and that the techniques they use in the field must change and evolve according to the information they receive from mine-affected communities as they conduct their MRE activities. Since 2002, more than 100 public health workers have been trained. Some become members of the core MRE team,

working with us to modify and improve the training materials and becoming a part of the training team. Based on knowledge surveys of the trainees, we began to develop other materials for the training program, such as posters and mine representations for use in public dissemination.

We now have a curriculum that has gone through several revisions and is significantly changed from the Cambodian original, but reflects the reality on the ground in the border provinces of the Thai/Burma border, and Karen state in particular. Our curriculum is multi-lingual, in English, Burmese and Karen languages. Four posters representing the types of mines and UXO found, plus realistic field situations, have been printed, and over 20 different teaching aids have been developed for the program.

Achievements and the Future

This MRE program built through cooperation with a non-state armed group has become the first to produce MRE materials specifically for the country, as its ruling authorities are only beginning to admit the extent and impact of the problem. Although the reach of the program is not widespread, some changes in behavior have already been observed, and it is the only program of its kind to meet the populations at risk.

Through this activity, we have laid the foundation on which future MRE efforts will be built. It would be helpful for all concerned actors in Burma to express their appreciation of this effort to the concerned authorities and encourage them to work cooperatively with the international community to establish a nationwide MRE program that can fulfill the enormous needs that exist for MRE within Burma/Myanmar.

* Photo clo AP.

* For more information on the landmine crisis in Burma, go to www.icbl.org/burma.

Endnotes

1. The International Committee of the Red Cross has many years of experience in engaging NSAs in humanitarian norms. Many of the issues of engaging NSAs have been assembled in the report *Ends and Means: Human Rights Approaches to Armed Groups* by

continued on page 61, NSAs in Burma

NSAs in Burma, continued from page 57

the International Council on Human Rights Policy, Geneva 2000.

2. The military junta that seized power in Burma in 1988 has since changed the country's name to Myanmar, as well as renamed the capital from Rangoon to Yangon, and changed the names of several of the internal states and divisions. The opposition continues to use the names from pre-junta times. We place former names first, and current names after or in parentheses. The Editor notes that the United States, for example, does not recognize the Burmese junta's name change of Myanmar.

Note

Nonviolence International is a founding member of Thailand Campaign to Ban Mines and a member of the ICBL Non-State Actors Working Group.

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