The U.S. Department of Defense Humanitarian Demining Training Center: A Center of Excellence

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A CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

Introduction

Humanitarian mine action (HMA) is a field known for its paradigm shifts. Just as technological advances create more efficient and cost-effective solutions for mining operations and methodologies, emerging technologies offer newer and safer ways to detect landmines. Integrating these advances into the HMA community and thereby the training curriculum, is one challenge faced by the staff of the U.S. Department of Defense Humanitarian Demining Training Center (HDTC).

Background

Established in 1996, HDTC is located at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and is the U.S. Department of Defense training facility for HMA. The center is in a modern 15,000 sq ft. building set amid the rolling hills of the Ozarks. In December 2003, the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) directed HDTC to be transferred to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency for oversight and direct supervision.

The typical student attending the two-week HDTC course comes primarily from the Army's Special Forces Operations (SOF). The students come so the HDTC to prepare them to deploy on HMA training missions in one of the 43 mine-affected nations presently supported by the United States. These missions range from establishing a new program to maintaining ongoing mine action initiatives. SOF soldiers are well-trained to perform HMA missions due to their experience working overseas in small units; their ability to work independently and an intuitive cultural awareness. The last trait is extremely important, since those "unofficial ambassadors" represent the United States—in its people, government and military—to the citizens of the host nation. The contact these soldiers have with their counterparts and students may be far more personal and intimate in nature than that which many diplomat experience.

Training Curriculum

The basic HDTC curriculum is the same for all students during the first week. This common-core training focuses on the basic principles of mission planning, U.S. Policy, and the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). All students are exposed to the signs of demining during an introduction to the use of mine detectors and basic mine clearance procedures. It is during this training that all students don protective equipment and locate and mark a mine in a one-meter training lane while at the same time practicing safe and proper techniques and procedures. While the novelty of the first few days amuse the soldiers, this training quickly demonstrates the difficulties and realities of clearing vegetation, avoiding trip wires and finally, of preparing the mine for destruction in place.

During the second week, students are trained according to their specific responsibilities for the upcoming mission. Generally speaking, Special Forces soldiers focus on demining skills throughout the second week of training, as it will be their responsibility to train deminers in the host nation. These particular soldiers arrive at the HDTC with many of the skills necessary to teach demining: they are experienced trainers, possess advanced language skills and have extensive training with explosives.

Civil Affairs soldiers arrive already trained and experienced in working with military leaders of government. This background lends itself well to the program management and strategic development aspect of HMA. These soldiers are given additional training on general management, the U.S. Department of State's Country Policy Assessment, the host nation's current work plan, and an overview of other organizations involved within the country. Armed with this knowledge, these soldiers are called upon to teach or assist in strategic planning, coordi-
Thus, although UN peacekeepers have been present in Lebanon for more than two decades, they have typically conducted only mine clearance and de-mining operations, and according to their own national military procedures. Though this may be consistent with the obligations of parties to a conflict under international law to be responsible for mines, booby traps and other explosives hidden by those parties, it does not necessarily lead to substantial remediation of the problem in humanitarian terms. In fact, throughout the more than 20-year experience in Lebanon of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), as seemingly simple a task as the handover of records, concerning the mine clearance work between incoming and outgoing contingents, appears not to have been accomplished.

Use of Military TAs

Visiting militaries have often assigned military personnel to serve as TAs to the various MAG and project implementation units. Many of these have performed admirably, and the secondment of active military personnel appears to have been a successful strategy for getting a mine action programme up and running in an emergency phase and in highly specialized roles, such as EOD.

However, the GICHD study has concluded that the overall contribution of these secondment programmes has proven modest in the long term. There have also been criticisms of the role played by some TAs, on the basis of unclear chains of command and reporting lines and confused terms of reference. It has also been claimed that coordinating authorities have sometimes failed to exploit fully their skills and potential contributions to the programme. Thus, a number of the case studies in the GICHD report, while acknowledging an important role for in-kind military advisers at the outset of a mine action programme, express concern about their contribution over the longer in a development context. This is the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cambodia in particular, where TAs may not necessarily have been equipped with the skills needed to sustain mine action. Nor are TAs necessarily experienced in building local capacities through advising their local counterparts.

In 1999, in Cambodia, for instance, the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) hosted 9 TAs, both military and civilian. A review by UN Development Programme (UNDP) concluded that, "while the military has made an impressive contribution in developing capacity within the CMAC, particularly technical capacity, in general military advisers are located to meet the training needs and capacity demands CMAC nowadays." Indeed, TAs may end up learning more about mine action than do their national counterparts. These difficulties are compounded by tours of duty—typically six months—that are often too short for the individuals to make an effective contribution to the programme.

In summary, the component activities of mine action have been closely supervised and coordinated. If they are to work at all and military staff are well versed in the concept of how many interlocking components make up a plan. Mine action plans require a similar degree of integration, but this planning has to take place with a number of different agencies, both military and non-military, which often have different perspectives and agendas. All the actors must be prepared to submit to overall coordination and direction. This does not mean interfering in the established military "chain of command," but that the broader issues like national strategies and priority setting for all the aspects of mine action are developed in a consultative manner with the full range of actors.

CONCLUSION

The GICHD study on the role of the military in mine action found that the military has played a significant role in a number of national mine action programmes. This can be either through involvement by the local military forces or with support from a visiting military force. Irrespective of whether it is the military that needs to undertake humanitarian demining tasks according to international standards. The decision to provide such support will need to be carefully weighed against the risk of culling their war-fighting capabilities, and what phase of the post-conflict period it is. The study was unable to determine if it was cheaper to use the military for demining tasks, as productivity and cost effectiveness are areas that require further study in the whole mine action sector. The use of visiting military forces on the other hand, has been found to be most effective in the emergency or start-up phase of a national mine action programme.

Wherever there is a mine or UXO problem, humanitarian and developmental initiatives necessarily involve a high degree of contact and interaction among military personnel, non-military mine action personnel and local communities. Military capabilities, if properly directed and controlled, can be important skills and organizational assets to complement many mine action activities, particularly in the emergency or start-up phase of a programme. Mine action actors are normally trained to be mission-oriented and to complete these missions as quickly and efficiently as possible. This works well for almost all humanitarian mine actions, and for many humanitarian problems like infrastructure repair, but establishing national mine action programmes under post-conflict conditions normally requires a long-term approach and a broad-based involvement of many different local and military actors.

Hence, the secondment of military personnel to mine action projects makes sense, both for humanitarian and development purposes. However, the military must be integrated into humanitarian mine action programmes according to the local context and the specific needs of the project. This will require a new approach to training and development that is specific to the context and requirements of each project.

New Plans for Training

The HDTC is planning to add two additional training modules to its curriculum. The first is a Level 1 UXO Clearance course which will enhance training of echelons to perform basic UXO clearance (mine removal) in contaminated areas. Students attending this course will graduate with specialized knowledge gained from hands-on training and mission-specific lessons learned in real-world UXO clearance missions.

The second new training module pertains to an information database manager's course on the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMMSA), the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) and the Canadian Mine Action Centre (CMAC). This course is designed to provide in-depth, hands-on training in the use of the CMAC's information database and mine action management system.
Thus, although UN peacekeepers have been present in Lebanon for many more than two decades, they have typically conducted only mine clearance to support their own operations, and according to their own national military procedures. Though this may be consistent with the obligations of parties to a conflict under international law to be responsible for mines, booby-traps and other explosive devices laid by those parties, it does not necessarily lead to substantial remediation of the public health burden of mines in terms. In fact, throughout the more than 20-year experience in Lebanon of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), as seemingly simple a task as the handover of records, concerning the mine clearance work between incoming and outgoing contingents, appears not to have been accomplished.

Use of Military TAs

Visiting military forces have often assigned military personnel to serve as TAs to the various MAGs and project implementation units. Many of these have performed admirably, and the secondment of active military personnel appears to have been a successful strategy for getting a mine action programme up and running in an emergency phase and in highly specialized roles, such as EOD.

However, the GICHD study has concluded that the overall contribution of these secondment programmes has proven modest in the long term. There have also been criticisms of the role played by some TAs, on the basis of unclear chains of command and reporting lines and confused terms of reference. It has also been claimed that coordinating authorities have sometimes failed to exploit fully their skills and potential contributions to the programme. Thus, a number of the case studies in the GICHD report, while acknowledging an important role for in-kind military advisers at the outset of a mine action programme, express concern about their contribution over the longer-term in a development context. This is the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cambodia, in particular, where TAs may not necessarily have been equipped with the skills needed to sustain mine action. Nor are TAs necessarily experienced in building local capacities through advising their local counterparts.

In the case of Cambodia, for instance, the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) hosted 70 TAs both military and civilian. A review by UN Development Program (UNDP) concluded that, "while the military has made an impressive contribution in developing capacity within the CMAC, particularly technical capacity, in general military advisors are better suited to meet the training needs and capacity demands CMAC faces." Indeed, TAs may end up learning more about mine action than do their national counterparts. These difficulties are compounded by tours of duty—typically six months—that are often too short for the individuals to make an effective contribution to the programme.

Enhancing Combat Capacity

The provision of assistance to local military forces for mine action purposes, in the form of training and/or equipment, has sometimes been controversial as these can also enhance combat capacity. The notion providing military assistance must carefully consider the potential ramifications of supplying training or equipment to a military force. The historical evolution of the conflict, the current peace and reconciliation developments as well as the nature of the military structure and deployment must all be weighed against the potential benefits of military support for mine action prior to the provision of assistance. There is no real mechanism to decide this, as most military-to-military assistance is provided on a bilateral basis.

Conclusion

The GICHD study on the role of the military in mine action found that the military has played a significant role in a number of national mine action programmes. This can be either through involvement by the military in a mine action force or with support from a visiting military force. Irrespective, at the end of a conflict, local military forces will need training and equipment to enable them to undertake humanitarian demining tasks according to international standards. The decision to provide such support will need to be carefully weighed against the risk of enhancing their war-fighting capabilities, and that phase of the post-conflict period it is. The study was unable to determine if it was cheaper to use the military for demining tasks, as pro ductivity and cost effectiveness are areas that require further study in the whole mine action sector. The use of visiting military forces on the other hand, has been found to be most effective in the emergency or start-up phase of a national mine action programme.

Where there is a mine or UXO problem, humanitarian and development initiatives necessarily involve a high degree of contact and interaction among military personnel, non-military mine action personnel and local communities. Military capabilities, if properly directed and coordinated, can bring important skills and organizational assets to complement many mine action activities, particularly in the emergency or start-up phase of a programme. Military organizations are normally trained to be mission-oriented and to complete these missions as quickly and efficiently as possible. This works well in almost all military problems, indeed for many humanitarian problems like infrastructure repair, but establishing national mine action programmes under post-conflict conditions normally requires a longer-term approach to "peacekeeping" one. Military forces and actors are unlikely to have the best idea how mine clearance fits into the larger mine action picture.

New Plans for Training

The HDMC is planning to add two additional training modules to its curriculum. The first is a Level 1 UXO Clearance course that will enhance training of technicians to perform hazard area clearance. The second new training module pertains to an information database manager’s course on the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA), the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) standardised mine action database. The HDMC responded to requests from its "customers" to add this module to its curriculum and already uses a version of IMSMA that incorporates digitised maps of the local training area at Fort Leonard Wood. The second module will be introduced in mid-2004.

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ENDNOTES

1. See www.gichd.ch.

* Copies of the study, The Role of the Military in Mine Action, are available in hardcopy from the GICHD or can be downloaded from the GICHD website at www.gichd.ch.

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