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The Quick Reaction Demining Force:

The United States' Response to Humanitarian Demining Crises



Introduction

Humanitarian crises, particularly crises in which landmines are involved, may occur without warning and require an immediate response. Examples of such crises include Hurricane Mitch, which struck Central America in 1998, the rapid, post-air war return of refugees to mine-infested Kosovo in 1999, and tropical cyclones Hudah and Eline that ravaged Mozambique in 2000, displacing thousands of landmines. To respond to such emergency situations quickly and efficiently, the United States developed a Quick Reaction Demining Force (QRDF).

Overview of the QRDF

In April 2001, the U.S. Department of State's Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs (now the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement), in cooperation with the Republic of Mozambique, established the QRDF as a result of lessons

learned from the immediate post-conflict situation in Kosovo, where threats to returning refugees existed. The QRDF is a permanent, professional humanitarian demining group composed primarily of four 10-man teams of Mozambican mine clearance specialists augmented by eight mine detection dog (MDD) teams of one dog and handler each. The teams can be deployed worldwide within 14 days of activation to provide immediate demining assistance in emergency humanitarian situations. The QRDF is deployed to demining crisis situations as directed by the U.S. government. The force incorporates proven demining procedures, including the use of MDDs and specially designed mechanical equipment, and is outfitted with demining-specific tools and materials. Once deployed, the teams locate, identify, map, record and destroy landmines, UXO and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) found in the areas designated for clearance. The United States oversees recruitment, provision of equipment, training and supervision of QRDF personnel within and outside

the Republic of Mozambique. The United States has also established an independent management unit in Maputo to manage QRDF operations in coordination with Mozambican authorities. In between deployments outside Mozambique, the QRDF engages in humanitarian demining in support of Mozambique's National Demining Institute, which allows the QRDF to both perform valuable service in that mine-affected nation as well as keep its professional skills finely honed.

Demining Assistance to Sudan

On January 19, 2002, the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) accepted a formal cease-fire agreement following the mediation of the United States and Switzerland for a war that had lasted 17 years in the Nuba Mountains. This war had resulted in massive population displacement within the region, and landmines had consistently been cited as a major threat to the civil population and a barrier to freedom of movement and generation of income. The government of Sudan believed that between 1989 and February 2002, 1,160 persons became mine victims in the Nuba Mountain region. Following the cease-fire, the displaced population from both within and outside the region had begun spontaneous relocation and movement despite advice from authorities to wait until their security and safety could be assured. The actual presence of landmines in some areas, their suspected presence in others and the inability to differentiate between the two situations all posed real threats to the Nuba Mountains community. The landmines also threatened the implementation of the cease-fire and the sustainability of peace in the Nuba Mountains.

The cease-fire agreement specifically referred to the cessation of mine laying and

the clearing and mapping of mines. The agreement also gave the internationally led Joint Military Commission (JMC)—in which the United States played a leading role—specific responsibility for supervising the mapping and clearing of mines. Immediate demining action was required in this region as it was critical to the success of the first phase of the cease-fire and the operations of the JMC. In addition, heavy rains in Sudan begin in June, which would have made ground movement and mine-related activities impossible or extremely difficult. The QRDF was deployed to Sudan during April-June 2002 to conduct mine clearance operations. The QRDF's mine clearance operations lessened the likelihood of casualties in this area as refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) began relocation into areas where mines were known to exist and into other areas suspected of being mined. In doing so, the mine clearance operations contributed to the success of the first phase of the concluded cease-fire between the government of Sudan and the SPLM/A as well as the operations of the internationally led JMC. This initial operation was so successful that a second "ad hoc" QRDF deployment was conducted during the period of March 2003 through January 2004.

Demining Assistance to Sri Lanka

In March 2002, the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam signed a cease-fire agreement and began planning for peace talks to take place in a neutral country. The 18-year civil war left many landmines and UXO scattered across Sri Lanka. Because no accurate countrywide survey of the mine/UXO threat has been conducted, an accurate estimate of their numbers and the areas they affect is impossible to calculate. The most heavily mine and UXO-littered areas are Jaffna in the north and the areas directly to the south of Jaffna. The deployment of the QRDF to Sri Lanka was in response to the government of Sri Lanka's request for assistance to resettle some 200,000 IDPs who had to travel through heavily mined areas in the Vanni and Killinochchi regions

and in the Jaffna Peninsula. The QRDF deployment provided an on-site demining capability until the United Nations could begin its program of assistance, which demonstrated the U.S. government's continuing support for efforts to bring peace to Sri Lanka. In early May 2002, QRDF operations began in the key village of Sarasalai about 15 km from Jaffna where Tamil civilians, taking advantage of the cease-fire, were returning to their homes and fields. The QRDF team completed its work on October 25, 2002, by releasing nearly 123,000 sq m of land in this area to Sri



Lankan authorities. The team cleared 980 anti-personnel mines and 42 pieces of UXO and additionally collected and destroyed numerous other pieces of UXO that had been brought to its attention by local residents. In early 2003, the United States demonstrated its continued commitment to humanitarian mine clearance in Sri Lanka by returning the QRDF to render another six months of demining assistance. This provided a bridge of assistance while the United States geared up to support the next step in the demining effort: establishing a humanitarian mine clearance training program for Sri Lankan civilian and military personnel so that Sri Lankans could continue the work in their own country.

Demining Assistance to Iraq

Under the direction of the Department of State, demining contractor RONCO deployed four QRDF teams to Iraq on May 3, 2003, to provide demining and battle area clearance (BAC) assistance to the

Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA). ORHA served as the initial governing body in Iraq and was eventually redesignated as the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). As the governing body, the ORHA/CPA was able to immediately begin rebuilding the infrastructure of Iraq and also quickly remove serious threats of mines and UXO—a task that fell to the QRDF.

Under the direct supervision of a RONCO Task Leader, EOD/Demining Supervisor and MDD Supervisor, the four eight-man demining teams and eight dog handler/MDD teams conducted operations with respect to the reconstruction and threat removal effort being coordinated by the ORHA/CPA along with Coalition Forces (CF). By incorporating proven battle area and mine clearance procedures, with the added asset of MDD teams, the QRDF safely cleared nearly 1.2 million sq m of land, which yielded over 2,000 mines and UXO from BAC and demining tasks in and around farms, wheat fields, power lines, government buildings, and houses and along major highways in the Baghdad area. On August 27, 2003, four months after the deployment to Iraq, the QRDF teams returned to their home base in Mozambique after they responded successfully once again to an imminent humanitarian crisis. Today, the QRDF remains "on call" to alleviate human suffering anywhere in the world while it contributes to the establishment of a mine-safe Mozambique.

**Photos c/o Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, U.S. Department of State.*

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