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New International Standards Debut October 1, 2001

UNMAS unveils new *International Mine Action Standards* after a two-year review and revision process.

by Suzanne L. Fiederlein, MAIC

On October 1, 2001, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) officially released 22 documents that comprise the initial set of new *International Mine Action Standards* (IMAS).¹ The standards replace the *International Standards for Humanitarian Mine Clearance Operations*. The new standards represent the culmination of two years of work to revise and expand the old standards based on changes in practices, procedures and norms that emerged from the continuing operations of mine action programs around the globe.

History of the Standards

In March 1997, UNMAS issued the *International Standards for Humanitarian Mine Clearance Operations*, which were developed from recommendations made by participants at the *International Conference on Mine Clearance Technology* held in Denmark in July 1996. These standards addressed aspects of the "mine clearance" process such as surveys of landmine contamination, mine field marking, mine clearance and mine/UXO disposal. They also covered related "enabling subjects" required of mine clearance operations: safety, medical support and communications. The standards were issued with the provision that they be reviewed and revised as necessary every two years.

As a first attempt at developing standards for an emergent field of operations, they were far from perfect

and not universally applied. The 1997 standards, nevertheless, provided a starting point for a far more ambitious endeavor to draft effective standards by soliciting input from those who would apply them in the field.

The Review Process

UNMAS tasked the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) to direct the review process, which began in July 1999, by drafting the terms of reference. The review was launched in October through the meeting of a Users' Focus Group (UFG), as stipulated in the terms of reference.² The Mine Action Information Center (MAIC) at James Madison University (JMU) hosted that meeting, which initiated a two-year long process of reviewing the existing standards and drafting revisions.³ The release of the standards was delayed a few times as the project expanded to encompass not only the revision of the 1997 clearance standards but to include the development of a series of standards relating to a broad range of mine action components. The standards were renamed the *International Mine Action Standards* to reflect their comprehensive treatment of the subject. They also were written to be compatible with the format used by the International Standards Organization (ISO).

During the first phase of the review process, technical committees based at the GICHD revised the standards and developed new standards for aspects of mine action,

such as the use of mine detecting dogs, not included in the 1997 version. The committees incorporated input from members of the UFG via extensive e-mail communication about the early drafts.⁴ The first project manager at the GICHD, Alastair McAslan,⁵ worked with JMU's MAIC to issue a questionnaire to solicit input from mine clearance operators. MAIC faculty associates analyzed the results of the questionnaire and presented a report to the second meeting of the UFG. The report on the questionnaire, minutes of both UFG meetings and other information on the review process were posted on a website maintained by JMU to facilitate communication during the review.

During the second phase of the process, the project managers conducted an outreach program to introduce the draft standards to the mine action community through various meetings, five regional workshops and the website. Beginning in October 2000, draft standards were released to UN programme managers and senior technical advisors, members of the Mine Action Support Group (MASG) and other interested parties in the mine action community. A draft version was first posted for public comment in November 2000.

Comments received during the outreach phase were incorporated into new draft versions, each of which was posted on the website, with draft version 7.0 emerging in August 2001. Meanwhile, work continued on additional standards for components of mine action not yet addressed, such as mechanically assisted clearance, management and training.

The project managers produced a "Framework of International Mine Action Standards" that indicates all of the planned components of the

Middle East

standards.⁶ Several components have yet to be released but continue to be developed. UNICEF's *International Guidelines for Landmine and UXO Awareness and Education*, issued in 1999, are undergoing their own review process in 2001 and will be incorporated into the IMAS framework as IMAS 12.10-20, *Mine Risk Reduction Education (MRRE)*. A tentative decision was reached in February 2001 at an UNMAS meeting in Geneva that the field of victim assistance already had "sufficient international guidelines and standards" and "there was no real need to develop IMAS for this area."⁷ However, as of now, a final decision still has not been made.

The review process was not without its controversies and disagreements, both within the Users' Focus Group and among members of the larger mine action community. But by August 2001, a consensus was reached that the latest version of the draft standards was clearly a substantial improvement over the previous standards and that it was time to begin using them. Plans were laid for a formal tri-annual review process involving a Review Board composed of a variety of representatives of the mine action community. It was agreed that the formal review process scheduled for every three years did not preclude "essential amendments being made within that period for reasons of operational safety or efficiency."⁸ The UFG also agreed that unresolved issues remaining from the drafting process would be on the agenda of the first meeting of the Review Board, tentatively set for March 2002, to coincide with the UNMAS Programme Managers/CTA Meeting scheduled for Geneva.⁹

The standards review website has now been redesigned to serve as the repository of the new IMAS. All of the documents posted on the site during the review process have been retained as a public record of the process, and the 1997 standards also are archived

on the site (see: www.mineactionstandards.org). The site is part of UNMAS' recently developed Electronic Mine Information Network (E-Mine) (www.mineaction.org) that links together various mine action Internet sites.

The New International Standards

The 31 documents released by UNMAS on October 1 include 22 completed standards and nine draft standards. Combined, they encompass the vast majority of the standards slated for development. If all areas of mine action-related activity are addressed as indicated in the "Framework," then some 45 documents will eventually emerge from the process. They cover all of the principal areas of mine action such as mine clearance, mine/UXO destruction and mine awareness as well as just about every conceivable aspect of the "enabling subjects," including safety, training, monitoring and medical support.

The development of the new standards represents an impressive attempt to devise standards that capture the entirety of the humanitarian demining process. Martin Barber, Chief of UNMAS, when releasing IMAS, stated: "The adoption of the IMAS represents a leap forward in the maturity of mine action, and can serve as an example to international initiatives in other fields."¹⁰

Universal agreement on the content of the standards, of course, could not be achieved. Furthermore, the standards still must meet the test of being applied to operations in the field. The establishment of a formal review process and a Review Board are viewed as ways to continue to refine the standards so that they can be appropriately applied by those in the field to improve the safety and quality of mine action programs.

Another step in the process of refining the standards to meet the

needs of an evolving field of operations are *Technical Notes for Mine Action (TNMA)*. The IMAS project office released the first *TNMA* in early 2001. The *TNMA* are deemed advisory documents to supplement an IMAS or to provide additional information useful to mine action operators. They do not carry the same status as standards but may eventually emerge as standards at a later date.¹¹

Adrian Wilkinson, the IMAS project manager, reports that UNMAS has approved an IMAS Review Board whose members "will review all IMAS for technical content and accuracy, and will consider whether they are still appropriate and achievable... Each IMAS will be reviewed on a tri-annual basis. All comments received by the Project Team will be considered by that Review Board." He also notes that the "Review Board will also assess which, if any, of the Technical Notes for Mine Action (TNMA) should migrate to full IMAS."¹²

As IMAS 01.10 *Guide for the Application of IMAS* notes (sec. 4), the international standards do not replace standing operating procedures (SOPs): "They do not define the way in which mine action requirements are to be achieved in the field—that is covered in national and local SOPs, rules, instructions and codes of practice." IMAS, however, does provide guidance to those designing and operating mine action programs, although this guidance is predicated on the principle that national governments have ultimate authority over their national demining programs.¹³

The challenge for the application of the standards is to ensure that the guidance provided is relevant, understandable and usable by those directing mine action programs. Those directing the review and revision process at the GICHD have worked to incorporate input from field operators. How well they succeeded in producing effective standards remains to be seen. Demining

operations, whether they are run by commercial contractors, NGOs, IGOs or governments, already have adopted many of the procedures and practices included in the standards. Upon being briefed about the proposed *International Mine Action Standards*, the international supervisors overseeing the demining operations in Central America reported that their SOPs already reflected the content of the new standards.¹⁴ The hope is that the worldwide application of the new standards will foster a safer and more effective process of eliminating the lingering negative effects of landmines. ■

References

1. Martin Barber, Chief, UN Mine Action Service, "International Mine Action Standards Publication Notice," October 2, 2001, distributed via e-mail from Crispin Stephen at UNMAS.
2. The government of the United Kingdom was the project donor.
3. The MAIC's work in support of the standards revision process was funded through grants from the US Department of Defense and the US Department of State. The Department of Defense also funded the "Standards and Measures of Success" conference hosted by JMU at the Wintergreen Conference Center in October 1998. This humanitarian demining conference helped focus attention on the 1997

standards and their need for revision and expansion.

4. The first draft issued to the public was draft version 4, which was posted on the review process website in late November 2000. For more details of the review process, see pp. 3-6 of the *Review and Revision of International Mine Action Standards*, issued by the GICHD on 1 August 2001, available at: www.mineactionstandards.org/imas.htm (25 September 2001).

5. Adrian Wilkinson took over as project manager in February 2001.

6. The "Framework of International Mine Action Standards" is included on p. 8 of the *Review and Revision of International Mine Action Standards*. It also can be accessed directly from the IMAS page on the website.

7. See p. 5 of the *Review and Revision of International Mine Action Standards*.

8. See p. 7 of the *Review and Revision of International Mine Action Standards*. Section 10 of IMAS 01.10 *Guide for the Application of International Mine Action Standards*.

9. See e-mail message sent by project manager Adrian Wilkinson to UFG members and attendees, 10 August 2001, and e-mail message from UFG chairman, Havard Bach, to UFG members and attendees, 8 August 2001. Also see e-mail from Adrian Wilkinson to the author 4 October 2001 in which date and place of Review Board's first meeting was set forth.

10. Martin Barber, Chief, UN Mine Action Service, "International Mine Action Standards Publication Notice," 2 October 2001, distributed via e-mail from Crispin Stephen at UNMAS.

11. See "Technical Notes for Mine Action" available at: www.mineactionstandards.org/

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[tnma_list.htm](#) (4 October 2001).

12. See e-mail message from Adrian Wilkinson to the author on 4 October 2001.

13. Section 4 of IMAS 01.10, *Guide for the Application of International Mine Action Standards*, notes the purpose of international mine action standards, section 5 sets forth the guiding principles and section 7 discusses the application of the standards.

14. Author's discussion with MARMINCA (OAS/IADB) supervisors during a field visit to Juigalpa, Nicaragua on 26 June 2001.

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