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Returning Mine-Free Land to the Afghani People: Afghanistan Mine Detection and Dog Center

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As a result of conflicts faced over the past 23 years, Afghanistan remains one of the most heavily landmine-afflicted countries. The Mine Detection and Dog Center has built one of the world's largest mine detecting dog programs with the goal of saving lives and returning mine-free land to the Afghani people.

by **Susanna Sprinkel, MAIC**

History of the Landmine Problem in Afghanistan

Since 1978, Afghanistan has faced foreign occupation and civil wars, which have left the country one of the most heavily mine-infested countries in the world. Estimates place anywhere from five to 10 million mines from at least 38 different origins in Afghani territory, mostly surrounding the Irani and Pakistani borders. These landmines lead to an average of 10 to 12 injuries daily. Although their land is no longer occupied by foreign influence, the landmine threat prevents many Afghani people from returning to their homeland. Afghanistan is not a society prepared to handle the severe social, economic and environmental demands posed by the existence of landmines/UXO in the area.



Mine Detection and Dog Center

The Mine Action Program in Afghanistan (MAPA) is considered one of the United Nation's top mine action programs, and the Mine Detection and Dog Center (MDC), based in Peshawar, Pakistan, is an NGO responsible for all mine detecting dog clearance and surveillance activities in the country. According to the MDC Annual Report for 2000, prepared by program director Mohammad Shohab Hakimi, "the [MDC], which is at the forefront of demining operations, is using mine dogs to save the lives and return the land free of mines and UXO to the people of Afghanistan.... In 2000, [MDC] deployed its independent clearance teams to 14 provinces of Afghanistan and cleared an area of 12 million square meter[s] of various types and categories of mined areas. MDC deployed 33 Mine Dog Sets (MDSs) to support survey operations in 16 provinces as well."



A landmine victim being rescued by members of a survey team.

Until 1994, the United States funded the MDC. Currently, the Center is funded by the Federal Republic of Germany, with some assistance from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan (UNOCHA).

Objectives

The purpose of MDC is to restore economic activity to Afghanistan so Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) can return to their native lands. The main goals of MDC are to clear high-priority land using Mine Dog Groups (MDGs) (consisting of four dogs with handlers and 12 deminers) and to provide MDSs to survey

teams. Additionally, the group aims to further develop a program for breeding mine dogs and to enhance the use of dogs in mine detection, with hopes of teaching other organizations effective mine dog training, clearance and surveying techniques.

Clearance Activities

When implementing activities, MDC follows the guidelines of the Mine Action Center for Afghanistan (MACA). In most cases, the MDGs concentrate on "clearance of roads, and mine fields containing 'minimum metal mines' (e.g., Type-72 mines, TC-6 and M-19) and low 'probability' mine fields." MDC is equipped to send a total of 17 MDGs (four in Central Afghanistan, four in the East, five in the South and four in the West).

In 2000, MDC located and eliminated 80 AP mines, 379 AT mines and 1,211 UXO, clearing 10.5 million square meters in Afghanistan. With an average of 4,000-6,000 square meters cleared daily, MDC has maintained "the highest clearance ratio among the Demining Agencies working for humanitarian mine clearance in Afghanistan." A lack of funds, which halted operations for two months, prevented the group from achieving their initial goal of 16.5 million square meters cleared. Additional financing from Germany allowed MDC to commence demining operations.



An MCPA survey team supported by mine detecting dogs stands ready for field deployment. c/o MCPA.

In addition to conducting a significant amount of mine clearance, MDC provided 33 MDSs (15 in Central Afghanistan, four in the East and 14 in the South, which will also support the West) to assist the survey teams of various organizations. The purpose of the MDSs is to increase survey operations and to decrease the number of mine fields by pinpointing a two-meter safety zone around suspected mine fields.

Training and Breeding Activities

MDC bred 65 puppies in 2000, 20 of which were fully trained in order to replace older mine clearance dogs. They expect to breed 50 more in 2001. The remaining 45 puppies bred will continue Young Dog Training before undergoing evaluation in the field. Once a mine dog passes evaluation and is sent to a field site, it must undergo a series of Refresher Training exercises. 45 dogs displaying weakness in training activities were retired as a part of MDC's Dog Retirement Program. The dog handlers themselves must pass a series of Qualification Courses before entering the field; 16 new trainers qualified in 2000.

In addition to preparing the dogs for clearance and surveying activities, the Center has continued exploring mine dog technology advancements by conducting Mine Dog Trials with 74 dogs. These trials involve testing the dogs' effectiveness in soft land, sandy land, grassy land and hard land. The results of these studies showed the dogs to be least effective in hard land areas and most effective in sandy land areas (see Table 1 below); however, a significant difference between sandy lands and soft and grassy lands was not observed until tested with landmines residing 70 cm below the surface.

S.#	Depth of Mine	Result in Different Field Conditions			
		Soft Land	Sandy Land	Grassy Land	Hard Land
1	10 cm	+100%	+100%	+100%	98%
2	15 cm	+100%	+100%	+100%	98%
3	20 cm	+100%	+100%	+100%	91%
4	25 cm	+100%	+100%	+100%	82%

5	30 cm	+100%	+100%	+100%	80%
6	50 cm	+ 50%	46.6%	46.6%	30%
7	70 cm	+11.2%	15%	11.2%	6.1%

Medical Care

The MDC staff includes a veterinary department responsible for breeding and treating the puppies and mine dogs by shampooing them, vaccinating them, deworming them and providing them with medical care. In 2000, 25 dogs were put to sleep and 10 surgeries were performed. The Center also includes a medical support staff to care for the dog handlers and deminers. Six MDC personnel were killed in demining accidents, and 26 were injured in non-demining incidents (two of them died). This medical team also assists other local deminers and Afghani people. In 2000, the medical staff treated 27,500 patients (2,500 from demining organizations and 25,000 locals and IDPs).

Problems Faced in 2000

The biggest problem that MDC faced in 2000 was the budget constraints that led to personnel waiting three months to be paid for their services from June through September. When the donor country (Germany) received this news, they supplied the proper funds, and MDC operations resumed. Another problem the Center faced was the condition of the dog gear, which was supposed to be replaced but was not received immediately. Once the teams received their gear, many pieces were absent. Additionally, three personnel (two dog handlers and one dog instructor) did not return from an Explore 2000 Exhibition in Germany, thus decreasing the Training Department staff.

This Year's Accomplishments

So far this year (as of September 2001), MDC operations have been successful. Seventeen clearance teams in 13 Afghani provinces have cleared 4,594,523 m² destroying at least 688 mines of diverse origins. As a result, MDC has already reached 70 percent of the goal set by MACA for 2001, and they expect to meet this goal by the end of the year. Additionally, 31 MDSs have surveyed 272,114 m² and cleared 379,279 m² of land (261,350 m² boundary clearance and 117,909 m² special task clearance). Most importantly, no mine-related accidents have occurred during MDC demining operations so far this year.

Mine Detection and Dog Center Annual Conference

MDC held its annual seminar at their training camp in Kabul in January 2001. At this seminar, Program Director Mohammad Shohab Hakimi presented conference attendees with an overview of the previous years' accomplishments pointing out many improvements that will be made to the program as a result of newfound weaknesses. Hakimi also spoke to the workers, reminding them how significant their contributions are and commending them for the risks they take to save the lives of those around them. He also reminded MDG team leaders that they should always follow the standard demining operation procedures laid out by MACA in order to ensure their safety as well as the safety of local civilians. Finally, Hakimi announced the company's goal for 2001 and the overall plan for obtaining this goal.

Once Hakimi had finished addressing the crowd, UNOCHA program manager Richard Kelly recognized the MDC as the largest mine dog clearance program, which makes up nearly 50 percent of the 350 dogs serving landmine-infested countries around the world. Kelly also announced a proposal by the United Nations for a two-year study of mine dog clearance teams in Geneva and his hopes that the MDC will contribute to the study. Finally, the conference closed as Kelly distributed the certificates of program completion to new dog instructors and handlers.

MDC Expansion

As a result of continued disputes in the region, MDC has been unable to provide services in northern Afghanistan. Recently, however, MDC provided a regional office in Mazar-e-Sharif, a city in the northern region, in order to implement a demining program in the area using MDC survey and clearance teams.

Additionally, an MDC team consisting of nine workers has been sent to conduct mine detection dog field tests in Yemen. The purpose of these studies is to find out if mine detection dogs are compatible with field conditions in Yemen. If these tests yield positive results, the Yemen National Mine Action Program will implement a mine dog program in their lands as well.



So far this year, MDC has sent out 17 mine dog clearance teams and 33 mine dog survey sets. *c/o MDC*

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