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Let's Go About Our Work!



by Dennis Barlow, Director, MAIC

The partnerships and spirit which develop within the context of mine action activities sometimes seem almost as important as the remediation of landmines itself.

I am reminded of a time earlier this year when James Madison University was hosting a landmine conference. At a working supper, I was having a wonderful time enjoying the fellowship and camaraderie, which had enveloped the diners at my table. It suddenly struck me that my dinner companions were Albanians and Nicaraguans. Ten years ago, we would not even have been allowed to meet with each other, much less plan cooperative ventures together. But it went beyond that—in these new friends I discovered a kind of kinship, understanding and humor that has become the norm for those of us involved in the thorny world of mine action.

In the aftermath of the tragic events of September 11, and in preparation for this issue of the MAIC Journal, I tried to assess new feelings and dynamics which might now bear on mine action in the Near and Middle East.

The first thing I realized was that, possibly without knowing it, those of us involved in mine action have been wonderfully — perhaps uniquely—blessed. We have developed such a singleness of purpose within a complex environment that we have not allowed ourselves the luxury of dwelling on,

or even being aware of, cultural or racial differences. They simply do not matter when the goal is to preserve lives, limbs and eyes and to facilitate a very basic form of human happiness. A concern for landmine victims and the plight of peoples assailed by this menace have carried us far beyond a cognizance of religion or ethnicity and into a single desire to improve the lot of innocent people whose very existence is threatened by a hideous and frustrating foe. While it may sound maudlin, it is a simple indelible fact that in all of my travels, and without exception, in the six years in which I have been involved in mine action, I have never, ever heard anyone in our global community differentiate among any racial, national or cultural group. Donor countries, corporations, NGOs, military units, regional and international organizations, policy makers, tacticians, logisticians, health organizations; none have ever postulated that a people or region at risk from landmines is more or less deserving of aid than another.

I also recalled how many wonderful mine action practitioners are from Middle or Near Eastern countries. Maybe it would be best if I never thought of my compatriots in terms of their nationalities, and maybe I never would have had it not been for the events of late summer. But this mental review has awakened in me a realization of how many Muslim and Arab players there have been in the mine action programs and the enormous good that they have done. I also realized that I am in a position unlike most Americans; they do not have much of an opportunity to gain a firsthand knowledge and appreciation of the indigenous people and cultures of South Central Asia or in the Middle East.

This current issue of the *Journal* alone is testimony to the interest and energy involved in mine action in the Middle East; more articles were submitted and organizations involved in this edition than in any issue of

the *Journal* over its four year existence. Regional conferences, innovative Mine Action Centers, the creation of altruistic demining NGOs and comprehensive national programs have been hallmarks of programs in this region.

One hope is that as we go forward with mine action that there will be no “chill” as global organizations continue their work in the Near East and the Middle East.

There is also a flip side to this phenomenon. Just as many Americans do not understand Muslim or Arab concerns, many in the Middle East do not understand the complex nature of the American psyche. Many people around the world, not just Arabs and Muslims, view Americans as a smug, self-centered and materialistic people who are not capable of understanding or caring about the plight of others. While most Americans are indeed fortunate to have a high standard of living, it would be most erroneous to infer that they lack a basic morality and sense of justice and caring. It is indeed this set of characteristics, along with a love of liberty, which perhaps most clearly defines what it is to be an American. However diverse Americans may be in other criteria, Americans are united in wanting to do good.

Therefore, it seems to me that the best thing that the global humanitarian demining community can do is what President Bush has asked the American people to do; to go about its work. There are those who despise aspects of Western culture, and there are those who blame entire nationalities and religions for single acts of barbarism. We cannot stop these people from being negative. But rather than curse their darkness we can light the way to better international understanding — as well as the more direct work of ameliorating the devastating effects of landmines — by continuing to work together seamlessly to give the world an example of global unity and trust. ■