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Working from a Distance in War-Affected Libya

by Nikolaj Søndergaard [DanChurchAid]



Assessment in 2011.
Photo courtesy of Marcus Q. Rhineland.

A unique partnership between DanChurchAid (DCA) and Lebanese authorities facilitates explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) training for Libyan authorities, who can now start their own national EOD teams and begin the clearance process.

Cluster bombs, rockets, grenades—virtually every form of bomb and type of ammunition—are scattered over large parts of Libya. Unexploded ammunition is killing children and adults; however, the Libyan authorities lack the capacity to clear these explosives, and the continued instability makes

it impossible for international demining organizations to conduct clearance.

With funding from the European Union, DCA is collaborating with Lebanese and Libyan authorities to fly relevant Libyan officials to Lebanon, where they are receiving EOD training in Arabic. Maria Berwald Madsen, program manager for DCA Libya describes the program: “We have worked closely with the authorities in Lebanon for many years clearing landmines and cluster munitions there, so it was natural to collaborate with them when we needed a place to build the capacity of the Libyan authorities.”

On 20 March 2016, 11 Libyans received EOD level 1 and level 2 training in Lebanon, funded by the European Union. The 11 participants were from the Libyan Mine Action Centre (LibMAC), the Libyan National Security Agency (NSA), police forensic officers, and army engineering corps.

Successful Partnerships

DCA worked with a wide range of local partners in Libya, ranging from the Libyan army to small, self-started organizations. In May 2011, it began operations in Libya, just three months after the start of the revolution. When DCA munitions experts crossed the border between Egypt and Libya, they assessed the situation and started clearance activities. In the following years, this first tentative effort developed into a large country program with headquarters in Tripoli and local employees from many parts of Libya.

Regarding DCA’s work, Maria Berwald Madsen said, “Initially, we focused only on clearance activities led by our own people and with local deminers that we trained ourselves. However, we expanded to also work with psychosocial support mainly for children, capacity building of local authorities, armed violence reduction and a number of other initiatives.” In the summer of 2014, renewed fighting meant that DCA had to evacuate all international staff to Tunisia, where the program is managed. Luckily, DCA was already working through local partner organizations, and this approach has since been extended.



EOD course in Lebanon, April 2016.
Photo courtesy of Tobias Selsnæs Markussen.

ACT Alliance team helps Libyans deal with unexploded ordnance.
Photo courtesy of Paul Jeffrey.





DCA teaches basic first aid in Libya.
Photo courtesy of DCA.

DCA's 16 local partner organizations conduct active citizenship, risk education, and psychosocial support as well as armed violence reduction activities. These organizations work directly with local DCA employees, while the overall management remains in Tunisia.

In discussing the many benefits of working through partners, Maria Berwald Madsen says, "We want them to take charge of their development in the creation of safer and more resilient communities. They are the ones that are a part of the community, they are the ones that know what the needs are on the ground and how to respond to those needs."

There are often challenges to working with new local organizations; many of them lack experience performing the work

and running an organization. However, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks as local citizens have a reach within their communities that international organizations lack.

From Libya to Lebanon

One of DCA Libya's main objectives is to improve the safety of the Libyan people by clearing unexploded ordnance (UXO); however, this is a difficult task to complete from Tunis. When international ammunition experts could no longer enter the country due to the conflict and were unable to oversee clearance operations on-site or train local authorities in clearance tasks, DCA was forced to move these activities outside Libya. Most courses in Tunisia involve basic clearance and



Photos this page: A quiz competition between students in Libyan schools is meant to attract young people to school work and provide a break from thoughts of war.

Photos courtesy of Tobias Selsnæs Markussen.



Libyan children are offered toys donated by LEGO in return for their toy weapons.
Photo courtesy of Tobias Selsnæs Markussen.



Workshops in Libyan schools use creative activities as a way for children to process their trauma.
Photo courtesy of DCA.



On Mine Awareness Day in Libya, piles of toy weapons were traded in for LEGOs as part of a program to educate children on the dangers of weapons.

Photo courtesy of Tobias Selsnæs Markussen.

safety training. High level EOD courses cannot take place in Tunisia, partly because DCA lacks sufficient registration in the country and partly because of Tunisia's insufficient facilities and equipment.

Charmen Rahal, the planning and security manager for DCA Libya, proposed that the Libyan deminers fly to Lebanon and conduct training there in cooperation with the Lebanese security authorities. Rahal has a background with the Lebanese Mine Action Center (LMAC) and was the operations manager for DCA Lebanon. Rahal noted, "The Lebanese military have extensive experience in clearing bombs after the conflicts with Israel. They work with clearing this stuff every day, so I knew they would be able to conduct the training at a really high level."

DCA annually conducts EOD level 3 courses in Skive, Denmark, in cooperation with the Danish engineering regiment, who provides equipment, facilities, and instructors. Luckily, the Lebanese authorities agreed to do the same. In addition to being closer to Libya, there were a number of other advantages to conducting a course in Lebanon (e.g., the common language).

"We are dealing with bombs and explosives, so it's important that the students understand absolutely everything that the instructor says. The course would not have worked as well, if we had for example completed the course in Denmark," explains Rahal, adding that none of the 11 Libyan students on the course knew any English.

However, there are quite a few differences in dialect for Libyan Arabic and Lebanese Arabic. Moreover, the field of EOD is characterized by many English phrases that cannot be directly translated into Arabic. Therefore, language was still a challenge during implementation of the program.

Another challenge encountered during implementation was the high level of training required. Participants were not used to intensive training and needed to study from morning to night six days a week while learning a significant amount of new material. This meant that three of the 11 participants failed the level 1 course and had to return to Libya before the level 2 course began on 17 April 2016. Eight participants succeeded in completing the level 2 course and graduated on 18 May 2016.



A large sign campaigning for a reduction in armed violence hangs on the side of a damaged building in Libya. The campaign was funded by DCA to inform Libyans on the dangers of weapons.
Photo courtesy of Tobias Selsnæs Markussen.

The eight participants who passed are scheduled to attend an EOD level 3 course in Kosovo, where instructors from DCA and Danish Demining Group (DDG) will conduct the training. Rahal predicts that all of the eight new Libyan EOD experts can make a tangible difference to the Libyan people.

While eight new EOD experts may not sound like much, “each of these participants can go back to Libya and manage a team of deminers,” says Rahal. “Today there are many ERW in ... Benghazi, but also around Misrata and Tripoli, resulting in many accidents. These people can go back and work directly on the ground removing UXO, which we will follow through our national staff in Libya. It will save lives. And we must do more similar training in the future.”

When asked why he wants the dangerous job of clearing bombs and ammunition, Mouez Miftah, one of the students completing the course responded, “Because I need to help the people. It is my country.” ©

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