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## Detonating the Media: Raising the Profile of Mine Action

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# DETONATING THE MEDIA

## RAISING THE PROFILE OF MINE ACTION

By Paul McCann [ The HALO Trust ]



Prince Harry (right) walks down a street in Huambo built on cleared ground from minefield H013, visited by Princess Diana in 1997 (left).  
All images courtesy of The HALO Trust.

In January 1997, Diana, Princess of Wales, travelled to Angola with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). She did not travel alone. Around ninety international journalists and a number of TV crews accompanied her. It is unlikely that Angola's sleepy second city of Huambo saw similar numbers of press until September 2019, when her son, Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, walked in her footsteps.

The two visits, separated by twenty-two years, produced arguably the greatest amount of media attention ever achieved by humanitarian mine action (HMA). Comparable with the *Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention* (APMBC) conference in December 1997, such exposure is

considered an unambiguous good. But how can mine clearance organizations and others harness this publicity to benefit HMA? How do you keep mine action in the public eye when such high-profile visits are over? And what issues do HMA organizations need to bear in mind when they seek public awareness for their work?

Princess Diana had been a patron of the British Red Cross since the early 1980s, and before 1997, had made foreign visits for the ICRC to Nepal and Zimbabwe on non-landmine related issues. In 1995, the ICRC launched its public campaign: Landmines must be stopped. The veteran British journalist Bill Deedes and Director General of

the Red Cross Mike Whitlam were among those who brought the issue of landmines to Princess Diana's attention. The ICRC considered taking Diana to Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>1</sup> or Vietnam, but Angola was ultimately selected to highlight the danger of landmines to civilians.<sup>2</sup>

In 1997, the Lusaka Protocols had produced a fragile pause<sup>3</sup> in the country's long civil war, but the country remained a war zone. Significantly, Angola's landmine contamination was among the worst in the world. The full number of landmine casualties in Angola is unknown, with some estimates reaching upwards of 88,000 people.<sup>4</sup>

Diana's visit to Angola included trips to rehabilitation clinics with the ICRC in Luanda and Huambo. In Luanda, she was pictured by the press with a young girl, Sandra Tgica, on her lap. Sandra was a landmine survivor who had lost her leg. Diana's visit was not uncontroversial, and she was denounced as a "loose cannon" by a minister in the UK government. That condemnation only served to generate more news interest in the visit and made it increasingly political in tone. The main opposition party in the UK meanwhile publicized its policy of supporting a mine ban. The most iconic pictures from the Angola trip were taken when the most famous woman in the world donned a protective apron and visor and walked into a Huambo minefield.

The San Antonio district of Huambo, to the southwest of the main square, was then known as the *Barrio Militar* because of the presence of several army bases—including a logistics base on what is now *Ave.*

*28 de Maio*, and a nearby large Cuban base. The presence of these military positions meant there were extensive minefields in the area. Huambo itself had changed hands during the conflict and had occasionally been under siege.

The minefield visited by Princess Diana in January 1997 was named H013 by The HALO Trust (HALO), which first began clearing mines in Angola in late 1994. The minefield had been laid to protect a military supply depot known as the *Regimento de Abastecimento Militar* or "RAM." Heavy metal contamination meant HALO's detectors struggled to isolate landmine signals and complete excavation, and clearance of the entire minefield was a slow and painstaking process.

The night before the 1997 visit, Paul Heslop, then HALO's Angola program manager, and now Chief, Programme Planning & Management at the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), had a staff member cut up one of his pillow cases and draw the HALO logo on it in pen so it could be stitched onto the Princess's body armor. During the visit she blew up a mine and when requested to repeat her walk through H013 by photographers who had missed the shot, she complied.

The photographs and footage of Diana in Huambo were front-page news and lead items on news bulletins around the world. In the aftermath of her sudden death seven months later, it became one of the most prominent images used to illustrate her life of campaigns and compassion. The body armor worn by Diana in Huambo is now in the collection of the Royal Armouries Museum<sup>5</sup> in Leeds



Prince Harry launches the Landmine Free 2025 Campaign in April 2017.



A HALO vehicle crosses difficult terrain in order to access remote minefields in Angola.

in Northern England. To this day, HALO staff simply mention the iconic image of Diana wearing body armor as a cue to remind people what HALO does.

Princess Diana's involvement with landmines has been credited with helping secure the adoption of the APMBBC—the most widely observed arms control treaty in history. In many ways, this is the ultimate example of a humanitarian or development issue harnessing its moment in the public eye.

For HALO, then a lean and relatively small, publicity-shy organization, the famous photographs of Princess Diana with a pillow case logo, give it global brand exposure. The recognition was such that HALO got by without hiring a dedicated communications team until well into the 21st century.



Chris Ship recording coverage for ITV.

Prince Harry continued his mother's advocacy work on landmines, but initially with a lower level of public profile. In 2010 and 2013, he visited minefields in Mozambique and Angola with HALO. However, both visits were largely private, with images and footage released to the media afterwards. On the 20th anniversary of the APMBBC and of his mother's Angola trip, HALO and Mines Advisory Group (MAG) approached Prince Harry to mark the anniversaries with a public event in London on International Mines Awareness Day, 4 April 2017. Before an audience of donors, supporters, ambassadors, and campaigners, the Duke movingly invoked his mother's memory in a speech that was widely carried by media outlets in the US, UK, and

Europe. At the same event, the UK government's Department for International Development announced £100 million (\$124 million) of funding for its Global Mine Action Programme.

The April 2017 event was hosted under the banner of the Landmine Free 2025 Campaign. Such was its success in garnering mainstream and social media traction that what began as an isolated event has grown to become a global advocacy campaign.<sup>6</sup> The Campaign's goal is to re-energize global support for landmine clearance and ensure as many countries as possible are landmine free by 2025. Currently, only 0.4 percent of overseas development assistance (ODA) is spent on clearing landmines.<sup>7</sup> The campaign is calling for a fair share commitment of 0.7 percent of ODA, which would be a game changer for the sector in reaching a mine free world.

The work that international NGOs do for development and post-conflict issues is not always an easy story to sell. Media travel budgets and foreign news coverage have declined, and audiences cannot always empathize with the plight of people far away. The involvement of Princess Diana and her son has always made HALO's approach to journalists easier, certainly in the UK. A recognizable face or name gives journalists a shorthand way into a story. That is why so many international organizations and NGOs turn to celebrity ambassadors to help reach both media and audiences.

In 2019, the Angolan government decided it wanted to develop the economy of the southern Cuando Cubango Province, one of its most remote



Prince Harry and Valdemar Fernandes in Huambo.

regions, by attracting and protecting wildlife. However, the minefields littering the province needed to be cleared first in order to ensure people's safety and to enable wildlife protection measures. Thanks to Angolan government funding, HALO will begin clearing the mines in two national parks. However, there are dangerous minefields across the region, especially in the wider watershed that feeds the Okavango Delta in neighboring Botswana. Clearance of the mines is a key component in the protection of the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area, Africa's largest wildlife protection initiative.

In June 2019, Prince Harry agreed to speak at a Chatham House meeting on clearing landmines in the Angolan watershed. Shortly afterwards, Buckingham Palace announced that the Prince would visit minefields in Angola during a September 2019 tour of Africa. Both the Chatham House event and the Africa tour announcement attracted widespread media coverage.

To demonstrate the need for clearance in the Okavango watershed, HALO set up a demining camp and tents for the media, its royal guest, and other dignitaries near Dirico in the far south of Angola. Moving supplies for the camps required repeated road trips, each of which took five days because of the deep sand and lack of roads in the area. Mined roads had to be avoided. Crocodiles and hippos watched from the rivers as HALO set up camp in one of the continent's last remaining wildernesses.

On the morning of 27 September 2019, Prince Harry walked into minefield HKK220 in the Luengue-Luiana National Park near Dirico at 6:30 a.m. He was accompanied by HALO regional manager José António, who had accompanied him on his previous Angola visit. Behind them were a selection of travelling journalists who were flying with the Prince on his African tour and representatives from the Angolan media. Minefields are no place for massed ranks of photographers stepping backward for a better angle. HALO had repeatedly rehearsed the minefield visit, taking sightlines into account, the angle of the sun at 6:30 a.m., and the safety of all concerned. After leaving the minefield, the Prince detonated a mine and made a short speech in which he described mines as an "unhealed scar of war." Much of this was broadcast live on British television.

The Prince was then flown, followed by the media, 800 km north to Huambo, where he was escorted to what once had been minefield H013, visited by his mother over twenty years ago yet is now the bustling *Ave 28 de Maio*. Within the area of the old minefield, there are now two completed colleges with a third under construction, a small furniture factory, homes, and shops. The most-photographed minefield in the world is a fine example of the development that can take place once landmines are removed.

The Prince was escorted by Valdemar Fernandes, who had been clearing a nearby minefield when the Prince's mother visited in 1997.



One of HALO Angola's all-women teams of deminers prepares for work.

He also met hundreds of schoolchildren who had no idea the area had once been lethal. The third leg of the busy day was a reception at the British Embassy in Luanda, where Sandra Tgica, the landmine survivor who as a young girl met Princess Diana twenty years earlier, was one of the guests.

Ensuring that the celebrity of the visitor does not take precedence over the issue itself is a challenge with high-profile visits. To combat this, visiting journalists were sent on prearranged visits to Angolan minefields, so that documentaries could be aired on ITV in the UK and on CNN and ABC in the United States. Feature writers spent the night in camps with women deminers in another part of Angola. Interviews were set up with landmine victims injured by the minefields in Huambo. The aim was to expand what could have remained a royal story into one with a wider focus on landmines and their pernicious effect on ordinary people's lives. As a result, a wide array of stories emerged after the visits. As expected, Prince Harry remained the draw, but audiences also learned about deminers, survivors, and the major impact of contamination on communities across Angola.

Both the Dirico and Huambo visits earned tens of thousands of media "hits" around the globe on mainstream and social media. HALO's website received 3,500 percent more visitors than on a normal day in September.

Following the visit was the challenge of sustaining momentum. With the issue of landmines in Southern Africa fresh in the minds of many, a UK-wide fundraising campaign was kicked off in conjunction with the UK government's Aid Match scheme. The campaign, *Breaking Boundaries*, focused on raising funds for mine clearance in Zimbabwe. Again, celebrity engagement generated considerable media attention. Newspapers could cover the campaign using images of Prince Harry in a HALO-branded shirt. In this way, HALO was able to use Prince Harry's work in Angola to generate interest and engagement to support landmine clearance in another country that faces similar challenges.

The involvement of Princess Diana and her son has benefitted the wider landmine cause and given HALO greater brand awareness than many similar-sized organizations. Such a profile does carry risk, as any journalist looking for a story on HALO has a better chance of getting it published by adding "Harry Charity" and a picture of the Prince in body armor to their piece. Similarly, any high-profile supporter is likely to have varying levels of engagement at different times. All charities with celebrity supporters have to learn to manage both with and without the attention such celebrities bring.

In seeking to boost their public profile by a high-profile supporter, HMA organizations, like any other non-profit, need to be wary of being eclipsed by the celebrity of their patron. In Angola, HALO constantly endeavored to put landmine survivors, hard-working deminers, and all beneficiaries of mine action firmly into the ambit of the media.

In 1997, a royal visit and dozens of journalists effectively fell into HALO's lap. In 2019, months of work, planning, and a herculean logistics effort in a remote part of Africa was needed to pull off a similar level of exposure. By focusing on landmine clearance, beneficiaries, and the transformation that takes place when mines are cleared, HALO was able to get its message through amid the cacophony of cameras. ©

*See endnotes page 69*

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Paul McCann has been head of communications at The HALO Trust since 2016. He previously worked as a spokesman for the United Nations in the Middle East and was a journalist for *The Times*.