Sri Lanka: A Photographic Essay

Sean Sutton

MAG (Mines Advisory Group)

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Sri Lanka: A Photographic Essay

Since 1997, the author has worked for MAG (Mines Advisory Group), documenting the impact of landmines and explosive remnants of war on countries such as Iraq, Laos, Lebanon, Sri Lanka and Sudan. Through a multimedia approach, Sutton creates photo exhibits and films to educate the public on landmines, unexploded ordnance, and small arms and light weapons.1

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist group in Sri Lanka, began fighting against the Sri Lankan government in an effort to create an independent state for the Tamil people in 1983. The conflict evolved into the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009), which killed an estimated 75,000 people.2

Landmines and other explosives were used throughout the conflict, leaving behind large-scale contamination in the northern and eastern provinces where the majority of fighting occurred. The contamination not only severely restricted internally displaced persons from returning to their homes but also delayed reconstruction and development activities.3

In July 2011, the National Steering Committee of Mine Action, Sri Lanka’s national mine action authority, determined that an estimated 255.22 sq km (98.54 sq mi) of hazardous areas remained for clearance. Since the 1980s, 21,993 landmine casualties have been reported, including 1,419 IDPs (injured or killed). A survey conducted in Sri Lanka in 2009 determined that a large number of IDPs have mine-related disabilities.4 In 2009 Sri Lanka had 38 casualties (6 killed/32 injured), down from 79 casualties in 2008 (11 killed/68 injured).5

In February 2011, I traveled to Mullaitivu district in the northeast of the country where the final battles took place. Some areas showed signs of life as recent arrivals from the camps established their homes, but most of the region remained desolate and abandoned. We passed through military checkpoints and on toward the coast through overgrown villages. With the exception of the odd wild dog, stray cow or patrolling soldier, the atmosphere felt eerie and lifeless.

Other than the army, the only people allowed into the region were deminers and survey staff. I saw the teams from MAG hard at work surveying areas for signs of explosive contamination and then clearing landmines and other unexploded ordnance. Without a doubt, their work was vital to ensure that people could return safely to their homes. It was a race against time as the local inhabitants desperately longed to return home and build a better life.

Early in 2012, I returned to Mullaitivu district and the difference was extraordinary. Where once I saw utter desolation, I now saw bustling communities with crowded markets and well-attended schools. Everywhere I looked signs emerged of greater prosperity and a new sense of purpose; I had difficulty imagining that it was the same place.

I am very fortunate in my work, spending time with communities documenting what life is like for them. Some times the stories are tragic and hard to comprehend, but this was quite different and a joy to experience.

The last Sri Lankan IDP camp was closed, and its people relocated to their homes 25 September 2012. Many IDPs do not live in camps and have yet to return home or resettle.7 MAG, Danish

Documents the Changes

I traveled to Sri Lanka a number of times in the past 10 years. I first visited in 2002, not long after the ceasefire between the government and LTTE. The situation then was desperate; people were repeatedly displaced and suffering tremendously.

Sadly, however, the conflict re-ignited in 2006, forcing the population, particularly in the north, to move ahead of the violent offensives and carry what few belongings they could. Three years later, the Sri Lankan Civil War finally ended with the defeat of LTTE. According to MAG’s estimates, more than 360,000 people were displaced and their homelands left contaminated by landmines and countless other dangerous items.8

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

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Demining Group, Devon Assistance for Social Harmony, the Sri Lankan Army, Fondation Suisse de Déminage (Swiss Foundation for Mine Action), The HALO Trust, Horizon, the Milinda Moragoda Institute for People’s Empowerment, Saravatra, the United Nations Development Programme and UNICEF are clearing the remaining areas.

MAG Helps People

Navaseelan owns nearly seven acres of land in Devapuram village, Sri Lanka. MAG cleared his land, making it safe to use, and he is growing crops and providing for his family for the first time since 2007.

Benjamin Romavl, a wiry man in his 60s from Sinnapandivirichchan, told me his incredible life story. When shelling began outside their home, he and his family packed their vehicle with their belongings and fled. They moved from place to place, remaining in one area for as short as three days or as long as six months, depending how quickly the fighting caught up to them. They often

Landmines found in Mutativu, Sri Lanka, are defused and placed safely away from detonators for later destruction, 2011.

Navaseelan, shown with his family, says: “MAG cleared the area where our home is and is now clearing land for farming. We are very happy and feel safe here with our children,” 2012.

Benjamin Romavl with his daughters at his home in Sinnapandivirichchan village, Sri Lanka, 2011.

Benjamin Romavl, a wiry man in his mid-sixties with an incredible life story told me, “Soon it will be like it was before and we are very happy. One hundred and fifty three families are here now (in their village) only because of MAG. Otherwise how could we be here? Our lives would be a question mark.”
After decades of Civil War, Sri Lanka is making positive strides toward recovery. As former refugees return home, it remains to be seen whether the poorest districts will have access to one of the most basic human necessities, clean water. Fondation Suisse de Démìnage (Swiss Foundation for Mine Action) hopes to alleviate this situation by clearing contaminated wells.

The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) threw the country into turmoil for nearly three decades, claimed as many as 100,000 lives and resulted in thousands of “silent killers” scattered over northern and eastern Sri Lanka. The conflict left behind large numbers of various types of explosive remnants of war, including mortar bombs, artillery rounds, small arms ammunition and landmines in unexpected locations such as water wells. Landmines and ERW continue to have significant negative impacts on individuals, communities, agriculture and the wider economy in Sri Lanka’s poorest districts: Mannar, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu. Even after resettlement, subsequent observations from the Ministry of Economic Development conclude that many people in these areas live adjacent to mine/ERW-contaminated land.2

Contaminated Wells

After the Sri Lankan government released land for resettlement, Fondation Suisse de Démìnage (Swiss Foundation for Mine Action) became aware that returnees to Vavuniya and Mullaitivu districts faced the additional problem of mine and unexploded ordnance contamination in wells. Internally displaced persons expressed lack of adequate safe water as the primary concern prior to resettlement.3

During the war, open wells were a convenient location to quickly dispose of unwanted ERW. As civilians returned to recover their houses and properties, they often found discarded ERW at the bottom of open wells. ERW in and around open wells greatly affected the health prospects of returnees, the ability of communities to resume agricultural production and the maintenance of livestock welfare.

To address the need for safe access to water in post-conflict communities, FSD set up its first well clearance team in 2009. Since then, in response to the increase in returning refugees, FSD’s well clearance project expanded to four well clearance teams. Each local well clearance team consists of a team leader and three deminers who are trained and equipped to carry out well clearance. Clearance tasking and prioritizing is carried out in close coordination with local water sanitation teams, the provincial authorities and the regional mine action office. The well clearance activities are conducted parallel to ongoing mine clearance and survey operations. As a result of this close cooperation with partners and stakeholders, the well clearance teams achieved good success. For instance, in 2010 FSD reported clearing 1,084 wells in addition to removing 19 anti-personnel mines, 1,86 UXO and 33,68 ERW.4

Well Clearance

A tractor transports the teams and their equipment between tasks. Each FSD mobile team is equipped with all the necessary equipment to carry out well clearance, including

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