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The HALO Trust Activities in Kuando Kubango, Angola

The HALO Trust employs over 900 national staff with eight expatriate managers in Angola. In 2008 HALO was responsible for 47 percent of the mined area cleared and 87 percent of the mines cleared in Angola. Its recent focus has been Kuando Kubango province—one of the most heavily mined areas of Angola and also one of the least economically developed provinces. This article begins with a case study to demonstrate the local mine problem, elaborates upon the full scope of HALO’s activities, analyzes HALO’s statistical achievements toward mine reduction, and concludes with HALO’s recent successes and future prospects.

by Rory Forbes, Marie Demulier and Andrew Genung [ The HALO Trust ]

On a recent Thursday afternoon, while his little sister Tina held her mother’s hand and hid shyly behind a tall white stick, Daniel Antonio posed proudly with his family on their farm. The result is no typical family picture, however, and if you look closely, you can see that the entire family is standing in a rather large crater with a single stalk of corn growing in the middle. Zoom in even closer, and you’ll notice that the white stick in front of Tina has writing on it that says, “1 x MON-200.” Daniel knows exactly what this means.

“HALO destroyed several MON-200s here,” Daniel says, referring to the large Soviet directional fragmentation mines, each of which contains over 12 kilograms (26 pounds) of high explosives. “The Cubans laid them underneath anti-personnel mines, and linked them to boxes of TNT buried a few meters away.” The reason Daniel is so familiar with the mine clearance on this particular piece of ground is that he works as a local paramedic for The HALO Trust demining team and was part of the effort here that removed over 2,400 mines from 10 hectares (25 acres) before the task was completed in late 2009.

When the mines were laid in 1986 as part of a Cold War proxy battle that turned this small, remote Angolan village into one of the most heavily mined areas in the world, Daniel’s grandfather was told to leave the land and was given a smaller plot in a crowded area closer to town. Now, with a growing extended family and a desire to start moving beyond their current subsistence farming and begin selling their extra produce in the local market, Daniel’s family is incredibly grateful to both him and HALO for the safe return of their land. With
his own family plot secure, Daniel continues working with HALO’s demining team less than one kilometer (0.62 miles) away, clearing ground for his neighbors in Cuito Cuanavale.

Angola’s Mine Problem

To understand Daniel’s family’s situation in Kuando Kubango province, it is important to understand the broader context of Angola’s mine legacy. Mines were laid in Angola during 27 years of bitter conflict that followed independence from Portugal in 1975. Government and Cuban forces laid extensive minefields around their bases in and around towns. Mines were laid around infrastructure such as airports, pylons, water sources and bridges. During the course of the war, positions were often taken and re-taken, and more mines were laid at each stage. União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola, known locally as UNITA, and other factions laid mines when they took a permanent position or before withdrawing from a captured post. Both sides laid mines on roads, in low density, and in locations that years later no longer look significant. The conflict ended in 2002, and to this day anti-tank mines on roads are a significant problem.

Even though Angola is a large country with wide-open spaces, the vast majority of mines were laid in or around towns and villages that are now growing economically and in population; thus, there are concentrations of mines where there are concentrations of people. HALO has conducted surveys of the four provinces in which it operates and has found there are 840 confirmed minefields remaining to clear.

Seven Years of Local Clearance

Since its initial entrance into Angola in 1995, HALO worked primarily in the Planalto provinces of Benguela, Bié and Huambo. After the fighting ended in 2002, the program expanded into the previously inaccessible province of Kuando Kubango and HALO started clearance there in 2003. HALO’s clearance priorities are the towns of Caiundo and Cuito Cuanavale, where it is actively supporting the return of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Due to the scope of required mine clearance and the 199,049 square kilometers (76,853 square miles) of Kuando Kubango province—or about the same size as the U.S. state of South Dakota—HALO built a base in Menongue, the provincial capital, to support opera-
tions, as well as a smaller base farther south in Cuito Cuanavale. Then, in 2009, the Vice-Governor of Huila province requested HALO’s help to conduct surveys and clear mines in the province. HALO’s area of operations in Angola now covers five provinces, with a total area of 1,246,700 square kilometers (481,353 square miles).

HALO works with both the national mine-action authority, Comissão Nacional Intersectorial de Desminagem e Assistência Humanitária, and the provincial government to formulate yearly work plans that ensure HALO assets are working on tasks of the highest priority and according to the development plans of the local authorities and other nongovernmental associations.

HALO is currently demining around the city of Cuito Cuanavale, site of the “turning point” battle between the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola and UNITA.2 It is one of the few areas in Angola where you can find what the layperson thinks of as a true minefield—organized parallel lines of mines originally laid to protect a military position.2 There are multiple rings of minefields and within each mine belt you can find between one and 10 rows of anti-tank and anti-personnel mines spaced scant meters from each other.2 The minefields present a huge humanitarian problem, because as the population has grown and IDPs have returned to the area, and the need for farmland, access to water and timber have pushed people near and through the mine belts ringing the city of Cuito Cuanavale.2

**Kuando Kubango Statistics**

Kuando Kubango is the province where HALO removes the greatest number of AP and AT mines in Angola. Table 1 below shows the number of AP and AT mines, pieces of unexploded ordnance, stray ammunition destroyed and small arms ammunition items removed, as well as the total area cleared in square meters from 2003 to March 2010.

The Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of States’ Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), the U.S. Department of Defense, and private U.S. donors provide strong support to HALO, both globally and in Angola. Table 1 also shows the results of mine clearance funded by PM/WRA in the province of Kuando Kubango.

Figure 1 (above left) shows the number of AP and AT mines HALO removed in Angola in 2009. Figure 2 (above right) shows the area cleared in 2009 in square meters in the provinces of Huambo, Bié, Benguela, and Kuando Kubango.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area Cleared</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>AT</th>
<th>UXO</th>
<th>SAD*</th>
<th>SAA**</th>
<th>Area Cleared in m²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Clearance</td>
<td>19,801</td>
<td>9,961</td>
<td>6,459</td>
<td>4,314</td>
<td>16,049</td>
<td>2,409,724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Dos-Funded Clearance</td>
<td>1,908</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>366,900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Kuando Kubango Statistics 2003–10

* Stray Ammunition Destroyed  
** Small Arms Ammunition

Figure 1: The number of AP and AT mines HALO removed in Angola in 2009.

Figure 2: The area cleared in 2009 in square meters in the provinces of Huambo, Bié, Benguela, and Kuando Kubango.
mines remaining here not only is due to the high degree of mine contamination in the area, but also reflects the fact that HALO has been performing clearance in the provinces of Benguela, Bié and Huambo for over a decade while operating in Kuando Kubango for a relatively short period.

Figure 2 on the previous page shows the area cleared in square meters in 2009 in the four provinces. The figure from Kuando Kubango is significantly higher mainly due to the fact that almost half of HALO Angola’s mine-clearance assets are deployed in that province.

The latest Kuando Kubango minefield status is as follows:

- 9 active
- 7 cancelled
- 62 completed
- 272 surveyed
- 11 suspended

The 62 completed minefields consisted of 154 hectares (381 acres) while the 272 minefields remaining for future clearance total 2,291 hectares (5,661 acres). The 11 suspended minefields are awaiting assistance in manual mine clearance from HALO mechanical assets.

Opening the Roads in Kuando Kubango

During the civil war AT mines were used extensively to close roads to military and civilian traffic. The presence of AT mines on roads, or even their suspected presence, has a crippling effect on the local economy, transport of produce to and from farms, movement of people, and ability of NGOs and the government to implement development projects.

One of HALO’s highest priorities since the end of hostilities has been to make roads safe for travel. Since 2002, HALO has opened 804 kilometers (500 miles) of road in Kuando Kubango (see Figure 3, next page) and 4,922 kilometers (3,058 miles) nationwide.

The opening of roads has been achieved mainly through the deployment of HALO’s Road Threat Reduction system. HALO uses a trailer to reduce road threats following a check using a metal detector since the metal detector will not be able to locate minimum-metal or...
plastic anti-tank mines. The weights on the trailer simulate a heavy vehicle so HALO can be sure the road is safe for trucks and buses. The cab for the operator is armored for protection in case of an uncontrolled explosion. RTR has two parts: a metal detector and “sacrificial wheels.”

On the sandy roads of Kuando Kubango province, detonation trailers are not viable since they quickly get bogged down. In addition, the presence of plastic AT mines renders the front-mounted metal detector useless. As a result, HALO is testing two new systems—both developed and funded by the Humanitarian Demining Research and Development Program in the U.S. Department of Defense’s Night Vision and Electronic Sensors Directorate—the Rotary Mine Comb and the Minestalker. The Rotary Mine Comb has two metal rotors that plow and
excavate the soil in front of the machine, bringing the AT mines to the surface. It can clear 1 kilometer (0.62 mile) of road every two days. The Minestalker is a ground-penetrating radar system that can find anomalies, including plastic AT mines, under the soil. HALO and HD R&D carried out field trials in Cuito Cuanavale from May to June 2009. Trials will continue during 2010.¹

Much humanitarian mine-clearance work remains to be done in Angola as a whole and within Kuan-do Kubango in particular. With the generous support of PM/WRA and other donors, The HALO Trust is working toward helping Angola achieve mine-free status as soon as practically possible. ✷

See Endnotes, Page 81