The Challenges of IED Awareness and MRE in Afghanistan

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In this context, messages evolve from discussions and focus on practical, detailed and precise alternatives as a way of promoting a reduction in risk-taking behavior. A key element is to teach the value of risk mapping, which can also be fed into the mine-marking and prioritization process. In addition, as noted in the 2010 Landmine Monitor Report, “as a result of its community focus, mine awareness/community liaison is also well placed to identify mine survivors who have unmet needs. Although community liaison teams should not necessarily be expected to have technical expertise in mine-survivor assistance, some times amputees are not aware of the existence of prosthetics clinics, or believe that being fitted with a replacement or even a first artificial limb will be prohibitively expensive. In such a case, the simple transfer of information—and possibly the provision of transport—can suffice to make a world of difference to an individual and his/her family.”

Similarly, a broader communityliaison approach can include rapid-response “spot explosive-ordnance-disposal activities. In Cambodia, the focus of MRE is now on risk reduction in the widest sense. The country modified its traditional information-based approach in favor of one focusing more on understanding concrete steps to make a particular area safe. This process is accomplished through improved marking and removal of known and dangerous ordnance. The approach is aided by the fact that a team may spend many days in a village undertaking unimpaired ordnance removal, proximity clearance, awareness presentations, discussions and mapping.

In order to better protect children from landmines and UXO, “child-to-child” training entered the MRE lexicon in 1999, with a number of organizations incorporating “child-to-child” methodology into awareness programs, most notably in Kosovo. In a context where teaching is typically authoritarian and learning is rote, child-to-child techniques can be liberating and empowering both for the children and their teachers. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that this approach also results in information sharing in the home and, as such, it can be used to educate parents via their children.

Similar to demining, MRE also demonstrates a clear and concise approach to presenting its activities. It is one thing to target thousands of people to be “at some risk” through a well-designed community-based approach or to produce basic radio messages to millions, but it is quite another to make sure that all those who are truly at risk are targeted, first with the appropriate messages and second, in a timely and systematic manner. One of the key challenges is to identify the riskiest groups of people in the most at-risk communities, adjust prevention messages and find the best channels to reach them.

Continued Necessity
MRE continues to evolve in tandem with the changing natures of the mine/ERW threat and communities’ needs to practice effective risk reduction. As such, MRE is no more about simple awareness-raising than demining is about digging up landmines. MRE continues to use an integral part of our efforts and responsibility to meet the needs of those living in mine/ERW-afflicted environments and to help fulfill their universal right to life. ❖

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The Challenges of IED Awareness and MRE in Afghanistan

Improvised explosive devices have become a significant threat to the people of Afghanistan and have surpassed the threat posed by other types of explosive remnants of war. In order to combat these dangers, the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan has worked closely with other groups to develop an IED-awareness booklet that supports current mine-risk education efforts.

The people of Afghanistan have seen more than their share of war and bomb blasts of war and their consequenc- es have been a part of Afghans’ lives since the 1980s. Mine-risk education has therefore been important in communicating the dangers of ERW. Children have always been among the most vulnerable to these dangers, and MRE campaigns are therefore usually aimed at them. In the current conflict between the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and insurgents, civilians are again living with the consequences of war. With the rise of insurgent activity, IEDs have become increasingly common. IED casualties have risen tremendously and now surpass the ERW casualties. This development fostered discussions about whether the mine-action community should create risk-education materials about IEDs, culminating in the development of an IED-awareness booklet in 2008.

Mine-risk Education in Afghanistan
MRE has gone through tremendous changes since its humble beginning in the late 1980s. The first mine-awareness programs were developed by Operation Safety, the United Nations’ emergency relief operation set up in Pakistan in 1988. At the time, the Soviet war in Afghanistan was at its peak, lasting until 1989, when the last Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan and the country became the scene of a vicious civil war. 3, 4

During the first years of Operation Safety, it provided MRE mainly in refugee camps and aid locations. The booklet was the specific intention of preparing returnees for the dangers of ERW. At the end of the war, mine-awareness operations began to move into Afghanistan itself. 5

The fundamental methodology established under Operation Safety still provides the basic framework for MRE. MRE is commonly taught by mobile teams, with two teachers and a driver. The teacher team normally consists of a man and a woman, giving them the ability to conduct gender-segregated classes. ❖

In general, MRE programs consist of lectures with the use of posters, silk screens, activity cards, brochures, booklets and pamphlets as education materials commonly termed “training aids.” The teacher introduces the main themes of mine/ERW awareness. ❖ The IED-awareness booklet is intended to supplement existing program materials.

To ensure that the guidelines and teaching systems set by the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan are followed, UNMACA’s quality-assurance teams perform routine checks of the MRE sessions. This system is established to provide feedback to the MRE teachers and nongovernmental organizations running MRE programs in particular regions. ❖

The basic structure of MRE has changed very little over the years. The teaching system developed around regular MRE constitutes a teaching ideology that transcends Afghan MRE as a whole and reaches community-based training, as well as mine-risk education using mass media. The overall MRE messages UNMACA developed provide the basis for all MRE within the civilian sector of Afghanistan. The NGOs providing the teaching in the field also follow the UNMACA guidelines.

From the 1980s until the mid-1990s, materials were very technical, with detailed descriptions of types and models of ordnance and mines, and their individual effects. As time went on, it became clear that participants were receiving more information than they could absorb during the relatively short sessions. ❖ Since then, a series of messages was developed to simplify the MRE training.

Today there are messages that constitute the core of Afghan MRE. The last major revision of the messages was made in the winter of 2008, when UNMACA developed materials that introduced several victim-assistance themes. The 2008 National Disability Survey Handicap International developed has been the foundation for understanding the importance of developing victim-assistance awareness within MRE. ❖

The new materials have been shaped so that the messages fit the Ministry of Education’s MRE plans and national curriculum. ❖ ❖ When the International Security Assistance Forces approached UNMACA in 2007 about cooperating on the IED-awareness booklet, the framework for cooperation between UNMACA and the Ministry of Education was being prepared for the transition. This meant that ISAF, UNMACA and the Ministry of Education worked as semi-autonomous teams while developing the content and design of the IED booklet. ❖ ❖
The cooperation between the civilian and the military sectors was evident from the start. UNMACA, as well as the Ministry of Education, there was concern that a civilian-military cooperation could blur the line between military and humanitarian operations.13, 18

In large parts of Afghanistan, where the insurgency has a permanent presence, the number of IED incidents is at its highest, which means that the areas where IED awareness is most needed are also the most inaccessible. The number of IED casualties has greatly surpassed those of ERW since 2006. This development emphasizes the need for increased IED awareness in the area. The IED-awareness booklet represents the first step in countering this development and gives the population some tools to deal with the IED threat in their everyday lives.

IED Awareness Booklet

Prior to creating the IED-awareness booklet, ISAF was engaged in MRE and IED-awareness activities independently in the field when the military provided training on an ad hoc basis. The United Nations and NGOs have criticized some of these MRE and IED-awareness initiatives for disrupting the civilian MRE system already in place by not following the guidelines UNMACA developed.

For the development of the IED-awareness booklet, an organizational framework for cooperation was established. UNMACA was the primary agent in the practical development and design of the booklet, working specifically with ISAF to develop a set of IED-awareness initiatives for disrupting the civilian MRE system already in place at ISAF.

The statistics clearly show a humanitarian need for addressing the IED issue. How to deal with the IED problem raises many of the issues humanitarian agents find themselves facing when working in conflict zones. The mine-action community’s neutrality is challenged when it develops MRE materials in cooperation with the state and government. The community also needs to negotiate with other non-state actors to gain access to areas outside state control to protect the civilians therein.4

Including IED awareness in the national MRE program in Afghanistan is many ways the responsible choice by the Ministry of Education, UNMACA and ISAF to deal with the actual problems facing human security in Afghanistan. However, it does open a Pandora’s box of issues that need to be addressed. The development of the IED-awareness booklet has been tested in various conflict zones in Afghanistan in the winter of 2008.

The development of the IED-awareness booklet has shown that addressing the knowledge of the military to the civilians is needed to go beyond the initial work of the IED booklet. In order to properly address the IED threat, comprehensive research and field testing are needed so risk-education materials can address the new challenges that face human security in Afghanistan.

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Figure 3: In 2006, IED casualties (red) surpassed those of explosive remnants of war (ERW) (green). This development emphasizes the need for a targeted humanitarian effort to reduce the civilian population’s exposure to the IED risk.

Figure 4: IED Awareness Booklet. The use of illustrations of military and police were widely discussed during the development process in relation to the security of MRE personnel and locals.

Implementation in a Conflict Environment

It is impossible to measure how much danger a child puts himself and other family members in by reporting an IED, but it constitutes a serious dilemma that the reporting of an IED might trigger a military response. This reality makes it difficult for the mine-action organization to be a purely neutral humanitarian agent. The direct cooperation between ISAF, UNMACA and the Ministry of Education, along with the transfer of jurisdiction over the MRE field to the Ministry of Education, undermines that MRE in Afghanistan has indeed become a part of the ongoing state-building project (i.e., construction of a functioning state).

The state-building project that began at the Bonn conference in 200124 and the following implementation of the material regarding Afghan cultural sensitivities and political issues that could become problematic in the everyday use of such a booklet.25

It soon became clear that a new framework was needed to sufficiently address problems concerning IEDs. Consequently, the Mine-Armament, UNMACA and ISAF developed a three-pronged IED-awareness message that included the recognition of IEDs and dangerous areas, the detection of IEDs, and safe behavior. One of the most immediate needs is to help children recognize IEDs, so the booklet constructed a separate message specifically for children.26 The booklet also warns of odd and out-of-place objects. Out-of-place objects were often used as booby traps during the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the civil war, and are often used by insurgents today.13, 14

In the safe behavior section of the booklet, the last two messages are fundamentally different and break with the post-conflict scenarios through which MRE messages are commonly developed. The messages reflect the dangers of reporting an IED and emphasize that Afghanistan is a conflict zone. The need to inform children of including police and military personnel for the insurgency. “Don’t be afraid to mention something that seems odd” is an attempt to ensure that countermembership against the IEDs are taken.

On 27 February 2008, when he said, “The Taliban was able to control, with the transfer of jurisdiction of MRE to the Ministry of Education, on the other hand, had about 30–31 percent, and the rest was local control.”

As mine action has come under the jurisdiction of the Afghan state through the Ministry of Education, the problems of the government’s central control have also impacted UNMACA. It challenges the mine-action community’s ability to work both in and outside of state-controlled territory. The development of sustainable MRE that can succeed in all areas of Afghanistan is therefore seriously challenged by the current institutional framework of MRE.

The Challenge Continues

Afghanistan today is at the forefront of MRE development, dealing with tremendous challenges relating to the security of the Afghan people, as well as the mine-awareness community itself. There are tremendous problems surrounding the introduction of IED awareness in MRE. These challenges that cannot solely be solved in the planning stage but need to be addressed when performing IED awareness in the field. Thus, the training of mine action staff is paramount in order to build confidence among the Afghan state and local communities. The security of the Afghan people, as well as the MRE community, is therefore vital to the success of the IED-awareness campaign.

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Figure 2: The map shows the activity of insurgents in Afghanistan as of August 2009. Skepticism between the civilian and the military sectors was evident from the start. Within UNMACA, as well as the Ministry of Education, there was concern that a civilian-military cooperation could blur the line between military and humanitarian operations.13, 18

Figure 5: Implementation in a Conflict Environment. The use of illustrations of military and police were widely discussed during the development process in relation to the security of MRE personnel and locals.