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U.S. soldiers and Army vehicles in front of the Hands of Victory arch in Baghdad's Green Zone, Iraq, on Thursday, 5 June 2008. AP PHOTO / KARIM KADIM

Iraq Mine and UXO Clearance Organization

Being plagued by landmines is only one of the many problems Iraq is currently facing. The country also suffers from sectarian violence, internal instability and economic hardship. As the government transforms its mine-action policy, one organization, the Iraq Mine and UXO Clearance Organization, has proven itself to be a powerful force in addressing the urgent needs of the Iraqi community. Though it faces challenges itself, IMCO shows great promise for rebuilding Iraq and stands as a model for future Iraqi nongovernmental organizations.

by Matthew Voegel [Mine Action Information Center]

Over the past three decades, landmines and unexploded ordnance have affected Iraq more drastically than other countries. Because of a past filled with internal conflicts and full-scale wars, Iraq has a substantial amount of contamination within its borders. An estimated 1,718 square kilometers (663 square miles) of land is contaminated, not including landmine-affected borders covering approximately 6,370 square kilometers (2,459 square miles).¹ In addition to the severe landmine problem, the government of Iraq has faced its share of domestic violence from non-state armed groups who have

been creating and using improvised explosive devices.¹ Because of a lack of effective Iraqi military control over munitions in the country before the invasion by Coalition Forces in 2003, many insurgent groups have been able to obtain various types of explosives and create private caches for their own use.² The IEDs made from these abandoned munitions are used in bombings and attacks against Coalition Forces, Iraqi government officials and many civilians. The attacks appear to purposefully inflict maximum casualties by targeting marketplaces, places of worship and shops.³

Organizational problems within the Iraqi government are an extra burden. In the summer of 2007, the Council of Ministers, after much lobbying from the Minister of Planning and Development Cooperation, decided to “disband” the National Iraq Mine Action Authority (NMAA) as it was under the MoPDC, making

the organization a “non-functioning entity” until a decision was made about where it would be relocated.¹ Finally, in the spring of 2008, the NMAA was officially placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Environment.⁴ According to Dennis Hadrick, the Iraq Program Manager in the U.S. Department of State’s Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, the organizational problems with the NMAA were directly correlated with the deteriorating security situation at that time. “Prior to the [U.S. troop] surge, the security situation was extremely dangerous and people were unable to get to their work,” he says. “Government people were being targeted for assassinations and due to the security situation [the NMAA] became [ineffective].”²

While the government has had difficulty addressing mine-action concerns and planning a national mine strategy, PM/WRA and international groups—among them the United Nations Development Programme, Mines Advisory Group, HELP and Norwegian People’s Aid—have been tackling the mine situation. The Iraq Mine and UXO Clearance Organization is of particular importance in this group as the first Iraqi nongovernmental organization for humanitarian mine action.

Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Assyrians, Phoenicians, Sunnis, Shias, Christians, Zoroastrians and other groups are all included in the make-up of the organization.

IMCO

IMCO was established in September 2003. According to Zahim Mutar, Director of IMCO, the idea to start the organization was first suggested by Harry “Murf” McCloy of PM/WRA when he and other officials met in the Green Zone⁵ in May 2003. McCloy and his associates were sent by PM/WRA to Iraq not only to set up a demining infrastructure, but also to develop a separate and indigenous body that would help mitigate the landmine problem.⁶

“Since that time, we [have worked] to establish IMCO and [fulfill] all administrative and technical requirements,” says Mutar. Created and funded by PM/WRA, the organization is staffed completely with Iraqi citizens. IMCO has 160 staff members (and sometimes as many as 200) with the capacity to double the staff if need be.⁷ “IMCO represents Iraq with all its races, sects [and] nationalities,” says Mutar. Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Assyrians, Phoenicians, Sunnis, Shias, Christians, Zoroastrians and other groups are all included in the make-up of the organization.

According to Hadrick, this diversity is one of the NGO’s greatest strengths, as they are able to deploy personnel that share common bonds with local leaders and populations, establishing trust and good relations. This enables IMCO staff to clear munitions in areas where other organizations are not able to enter. “They [IMCO personnel] don’t carry weapons; they use their NGO/Iraqi status and negotiate with the elders and the sheiks of those areas that [they] are going to operate in,” says Hadrick. “That’s why they have been very successful in getting access to areas where other organizations can’t.”

IMCO is supported by PM/WRA through RONCO Consulting Corporation. “RONCO [was] assigned by the Department of State,” explains Mutar, “to train and qualify IMCO through providing technical training staff for different fields.”⁷ RONCO, which has been in business since 1974, is an international professional services firm that specializes in humanitarian and commercial demining, ordnance disposal, environmental remediation, security services and post-conflict operations. The company has initiated clearance and security operations and/or has trained, mentored and advised local

organizations in over 35 countries, where its work has resulted in the clearance of over 250 million square meters (96.5 square miles) of land.

IMCO has a wide range of capabilities in mine action and has taken on the task of training the Iraqi Army and Iraqi police personnel. “The high level of qualification and development [that] IMCO’s staff [has maintained], helps IMCO train the Iraqi Army and police,” says Mutar. “Most instructors in the Iraqi Army and police graduated from IMCO; this leads IMCO to be proud.” Because of the organization’s capabilities, Mutar was asked by Iraqi Minister of the Environment Nermeen Othman to meet with her deputy on 30 June 2008, to discuss the training proposal for the national mine-action staff. Hadrick says IMCO started training courses for NMAA employees in July 2008.

Since 2004, IMCO has been able to clear over 12 square kilometers (4.6 square miles) of contaminated land in Iraq.⁷ In 2006, the organization’s main tasks included supporting oilfield construction, the rehabilitation of water and sewage systems and disposal of openly available stocks of explosive remnants of war to prevent usage by non-state armed groups.⁸ “IMCO [has become] a model for local NGOs and has been consulted by the government for restructuring the NMAA; this indicates IMCO’s level [of expertise] and [its] reputation,” says Mutar. “IMCO’s name has [become] well-known after its announcement on 10 September 2007, National Mine Action and UXO Awareness Day, [by] publishing [public service announcements] and displays in the newspaper and TV channels about the hazards of mines and UXO. No one [has undertaken] such a thing before, and the Department of State [deserves] credit [for its] continuous support.”

International organizations in Iraq, like the UNDP, are also beginning to notice the local NGO and its accomplishments. Kent Paulusson, the Mine Action Advisor of UNDP–Iraq, says that IMCO was an asset for mine action in Iraq.⁹ “UNDP–Iraq advocates for support for IMCO to donors and the Iraqi government on a [continual] basis,” he says. “IMCO is a valuable asset that can be used to support the reconstruction efforts as well as an excellent technical capacity that could be instrumental to building additional clearance capacity in Iraq.”

Current Issues

Many of the challenges IMCO faces are beyond the organization’s control. One such problem, Mutar admits, has to do with governmental structure and how the National Iraq Mine Action Authority operates. The NMAA was disorganized and dysfunctional for a long time because of governmental transitions and a tenuous security situation.⁵ Another problem facing IMCO is its central location within the Green Zone and its inability to control the property on which it is housed. This property, which is expensive to rent, is currently controlled by the U.S. government but is expected to be turned over to the Iraqi government in the next few years.⁶ Mutar fears that once the transition is made, IMCO

will be forced to relocate to a different location. "IMCO is not stable in its compound in the Green Zone, and the Iraqi government can displace us at any time," he says.

organization has been involved in numerous projects and continues to keep a full schedule. This includes various weapon-destruction projects as well as reconstruction projects

To have the Sunnis, Shias, Kurds and Christians work side by side ... and get along is what I would like to see for the future in Iraq.

Along with other demining organizations around Baghdad, Basra and Najaf, one big challenge the IMCO staff faces is the threat from non-state armed groups and the violence they perpetuate.⁷ While the violence has decreased in 2008 to date, the issue remains. "No doubt the violence in Iraq has a great impact on those working with IMCO," says Mutar. "[First of all,] as an ordinary citizen, there is a probability that he/she may be killed while walking in the street and, secondly, the [threat exists] because he/she works with the Americans or inside the Green Zone. Many IMCO staff quit because of such [threats], and four [others] have been killed." Daniel Bowen, the Middle East Regional Manager for RONCO Consulting Corp, says that for a native Iraqi, being associated with a U.S.-supported organization like IMCO can be very danger-

like the Shat al-Arab development project, and the reparation of the al-Rumaila oilfields and the al-Zubair area.⁷ New clearance operations within certain areas of Baghdad are now underway along with projects in areas new to the NGO.

"Now IMCO [has been] tasked [with] three humanitarian projects in al-Kut, al-Muthanna and Babylon governorates," says Mutar. For Mutar, expanding IMCO is one of the organization's long-term goals as he hopes to open branches in the cities of Basra, Kirkuk and Kut. He also hopes to establish a school for training staff members of official institutions, unofficial institutions and NGOs in demining works.⁷

For Dennis Hadrick, IMCO is one of the many positive stories to come out of Iraq. "I respect IMCO as an organization for their hard work in a dangerous environment, and

...for a native Iraqi, being associated with a U.S.-supported organization like IMCO can be very dangerous...

ous and has forced some to leave the organization. "Any Iraqi that is working for a Western-type company faces that," he says. Mutar admits that there is nothing the organization can do to guarantee the employees' safety, but instead pointed out that the brave men and women of IMCO have done their best to function in the face of danger. "They have their own safety precautions," he says, "for example, changing their routes [to and from work] or even changing their houses."

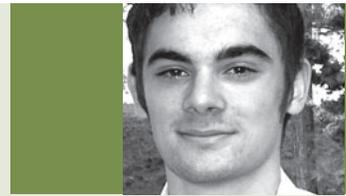
Going Forward

As things seem to be gradually improving in Iraq, IMCO's future appears bright. The

they are one the true success stories of what a sectarian organization can do," says Hadrick. "To have the Sunnis, Shias, Kurds and

Christians work side-by-side ... and get along is what I would like to see for the future in Iraq." For Zahim Mutar, IMCO is set for a great future because it is not only a pioneer in the field of Iraqi mine action, but also an example of progress for Iraq as a nation. "The Iraqi community [now realizes] the importance of IMCO and its existence because IMCO has [better] data and capabilities than [the] Iraqi ministries," says Mutar. He expects IMCO's success to continue with the help of the U.S. Department of State. IMCO was able to meet the challenges it faced and prove itself and it will continue to be successful in the future, he says. ♦

See Endnotes, page 112



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