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Clearing the Way in Chad: Assessment, Access and Impact

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The Mines Advisory Group began working in Chad in late 2004 with the objective of demining the water points in several of the war-torn provinces in the northern portion of the country. MAG formulated a three-phase plan that was extremely well-executed, even while dealing with the harsh desert climate, achieving its objectives before the deadline and under budget. A total of 21 watering points and 28 paths to access the watering points were cleared, while 84 areas were identified as dangerous. The work had a particularly positive effect on the local nomadic populations, who make a living traveling, often through mined areas, to trade goods.

by Katharine Hopper [Mines Advisory Group]

The third phase of operations saw the completion of the remaining high-priority tasks in Borkou and Ennedi and the expansion of activities into Tibesti. This expansion was made possible by the signing of a peace agreement between the Chadian government and the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad in August 2005 allowing MAG to start operations in and around Zouarke. This project marked the first time an international nongovernmental organization had visited the communities in this remote but highly contaminated part of Chad. It was a breakthrough in terms of providing much-needed humanitarian mine-action services and support to the peace-building efforts of the government in the area. 

The humanitarian impact of MAG’s work in Chad was the direct benefit to both nomadic and settled populations. Northern Chad lies at the heart of historic trading routes across the Sahara from North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa, and the nomadic populations provide the economic link between the two regions, crossing vast areas of often heavily contaminated land. While there is no doubt that the decontamination of any area is of huge benefit to all communities, there is often little attention given to nomadic communities, which play an important role in sustaining the whole region and face particular dangers in the course of their movements and activities. Both nomadic and settled populations are heavily reliant on these water points, which are rare in the deserts of northern Chad. MAG’s efforts in the northern provinces, often working in difficult and extreme conditions, have ensured increased access to water for local populations and resulted in the opening of the Route des Puits, or the Road of Wells, in the Koro-Toro region. This road had been closed since 1987; it is a main access route to the north, with a number of suspected contaminated wells (as well as contaminated land) along the length of it. This clearance represented a key project achievement as work in this inhospitable terrain was an arduous task, but its clearance meant a material contribution to improving access to water for local and nomadic populations.

Though the nomadic populations themselves are by their very nature somewhat elusive, they have been quick to make use of the recently demilitarized water points, as evidenced by newly planted date palms around the water points. The nomads plant date palms where they have access to water and visit them once or twice a year to harvest them, trading the dates in exchange for goods. MAG has thus far cleared 21 water points and marked 28 routes to ensure access to the water points is safe and unhindered.

In April 2006, following the violent clashes that took place when rebel forces entered N’Djamena seeking to overthrow the government, MAG was unable to deploy to the north due to the ongoing security situation. MAG was specifically asked by the Chad High Commission for National Demining to support its teams in conducting battle-area clearance in the capital, providing an immediate emergency response in the three weeks following the fighting. The teams completed 11 BAC tasks and nine explosive-ordnance-disposal responses in N’Djamena, thus ensuring that the explosive debris of conflict did not pose an ongoing threat to local populations.

MAG was successful in building a relationship with the local authorities and communities. Local people provided the MAG teams with information that enabled the identification and destruction of several Man-Portable Air-Defense Systems (shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles also known as MANPADS), including seven SAM-6’s and one Stinger. 

Challenges and Lessons Learned

There is no doubt that operating in Chad presented particular problems and challenges, not the least of which was the requirement for the teams to work in isolated and austere conditions for long periods of time. This difficult operating environment presented logistical challenges, and Mission Aviation Fellowship supported MAG by ensuring that need-
Survey and Ordnance Disposal in the Polisario-controlled Areas of the Western Sahara

Due to a 15-year war, Western Sahara has a number of unmarked territories full of explosive remnants of war. Landmine Action, a nongovernmental organisation from the United Kingdom, has taken several measures to improve the situation in Western Sahara. In addition to surveying, marking and reporting, one of LMA’s chief intentions is to train members of the local population in an explosive-ordnance-disposal programme.

by Zlatko Gegic and Artyom Harutyunyan [Landmine Action]

Western Sahara is a territory located in northwest Africa, bordered by Morocco to the north and Algeria to the northeast, Mauritania to the east and south and the Atlantic Ocean on the west. It is one of the most sparsely populated territories in the world, mainly consisting of desert Ballardas.2

After Spain left Western Sahara in 1975 as part of a decolonisation plan, the territory became disputed between the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro, also known as the Polisario, a nationalist movement for independence, and the Kingdom of Morocco. The conflict ended with the United Nations-sponsored cease-fire agreement in 1991. Since then, most of the territory has been controlled by Morocco, with the remainder under the control of the government of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic.3

Project Background

The 15-year-long military conflict left Western Sahara littered with mines and explosive remnants of war. The densest concentration of mines and ERW is found to the east of the berm, the 2,400-kilometre (1,491-mile) earthwork fortification that runs the length of Western Sahara and divides the Moroccan and the Polisario-controlled zones. The berm is part of a series of walls, ditches and minefields constructed by Moroccan forces between 1981 and 1987. Mines and ERW are found near settlements throughout areas now under Polisario control that were previously captured and temporarily occupied by Moroccan forces. Mines and ERW are also found on ambush sites in the vicinity of former Moroccan military supply routes as well as transit routes and water holes used by the Polisario.

ERW identified during the course of the preliminary survey conducted in October 2005 and February/March 2006 by Landmine Action included mostly United States- and French-manufactured ammunition, due to their strong military support of Morocco. Countries such as China, the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia supplied some ammunition for the conflict—if not entirely. Anti-vehicle mines identified are primarily of European origin, namely Belgian, French, Italian, Romanian, Soviet and Yugoslav.

The ERW pose a risk to local civilians, particularly nomadic populations, as well as United Nations and NGO personnel traversing the Polisario-controlled zone. They would also impede a repatriation of Saharawi refugees from the five camps in southeastern Algeria in the event that a political settlement is reached on Western Sahara’s sovereignty issue.

Objectives

In October 2006, Landmine Action, a U.K.-based NGO, began conducting a survey of the threat mines and ERW present in the northern sector of the Polisario-controlled zone. One of the objectives for Landmine Action is to analyze the survey data to assess the nature and extent of the problem and feasibility of the marking, clearance, removal and destruction of ERW and mines. Since the start of 2007, Landmine Action has been carrying out the marking, clearing, removal and destruction of the ERW. The organisation’s project offers a long-term solution to the problem through the establishment of a local demining and explosive-ordnance-disposal capacity.

The strategy and structure of the survey is in accordance with the recommendations of a United Nations Mission to the Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) and the Polisario Ministry of Defence. Its strategy is to reduce the...