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A Firm Foothold: RONCO Operations in Sudan

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Protecting vulnerable human populations. The ICBL has done a great service in raising awareness about the damage caused by landmines. Much of their case rests on the fact that mines do not discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. As we know, the damage extends far beyond the physical injuries themselves. The social stigma and the added economic burden that a loss of a productive person creates for victims and their families are additional harms.

Further harm results not from actual detonations, but from the belief that landmines are present in the area. The threat of mines blocks access to vital resources such as land, water, housing, public buildings, infrastructure and transport. Avoiding injury requires curtailing or refraining from seeking substance or accessing the area for productivity. To make matters worse, mined roads transport the goods once collected or grown, thereby provoking income and trade.

However, while landmines can be used by someone on the outside to keep a group contained within a controlled territory, so too can they be used to protect a group within a circumstance-tapped territory by keeping dangerous persons out. Landmines were originally intended for purposes of defense, to the fact that some now use them on the defense does not mean that landmines cease to play this defensive role.

Protecting vulnerable populations from armed forces. Whether or not one believes a line between combatants and noncombatants can or should be maintained, the fact is many aggressive parties are willing to force noncombatants into their conflicts. Whether the noncombatants are “innocent” or are implicated by association and by providing indirect support to combatants, they require defense. To the extent landmines help to provide that defense, they protect children and farmers, etc., those people who tend to be the focal point of the humanitarian campaign to ban landmines.

If we take the moral argument against all landmine use seriously, then we have to conclude that it is wrong to use mines to defend these populations. If we join supporters of the ICBL in stigmatizing landmine use, we must also stigmatize people who want to defend these populations. We would have to stigmatize people who are glad mines are used to defend them from rape and murder. We would have to stigmatize families of soldiers who are glad that their spouses and children have one more means of ensuring that they come home.

Conclusion

To stigmatize landmines per se is to demote not only the guerrillas and the oppressive regimes that are effectively judged by their aims and methods anyway. There are people who use mines for their own defense in the long-standing absence of adequate protection from the military and even the United Nations. To pretend that landmines do not serve these purposes is to obfuscate the conditions of the vulnerable populations who are compelled to use them to defend themselves when no one else will.

Although people who oppose all landmine use have not caused the acute problems faced by vulnerable communities, I would suggest that the shift of debate and the willful overlooking of such cases implicates them in terms of skewing our response to these communities. Noncombatants turn to landmines for self-protection, they must be particularly vulnerable. When the self-appointed authorities on the matter fail to acknowledge such cases exist, it makes sound like there are no such cases, rendering the essence of their vulnerability invisible.

And when we pretend landmines never help, we worsen the situation of some communities. Therefore by denying them recourse to an effective tool, we make them more vulnerable. And by denying ourselves recourse to an effective tool, we make it easier to give ourselves permission to claim that there is nothing we can do either.

See Estimates, page 109

Sudan presents a variety of problems for mineaction operations. Control of the country, which was created and born as war since 1983, is now divided between the Sudanese government and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), with government forces claiming the majority of the north and both sides maintaining some control in the south. Both the government and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army used landmines throughout the civil war and as a result, landmines now pose a serious threat to civilians. For example, the United Nations reports that in 2004, landmines were responsible for more than 15 deaths and 50 injuries. The actual number of deaths and injuries has likely been higher but goes unreported due to the difficulty of access throughout much of the south.
Internally displaced persons fleeing conflict areas such as the Darfur region are at particular risk because they have little or no knowledge of potential threats and are often forced to move regardless of the potential landmine problems.

Both the Sudanese government and the SPLA have accepted assistance from the United Nations, which is in the process of implementing a plan to eliminate Sudan’s landmine threat. In 2002, the United Nations established the National Mine Action Office in Khartoum, along with regional offices in central and southern Sudan, and various activities spanned throughout the country. From these locations, the United Nations car- ried out all aspects of mine action, including demine clearance, mine-risk education, sur- vivor assistance and stockpile destruction. The UNMIS is responsible for coordinating these efforts and helping build a lasting mine- action presence in the region. Unfortunately, operations have often been interrupted by the ongoing conflict.

Following the most recent peace treaty agreements between the government and the SPLA in January 2005, the United Nations moved quickly to establish the U.N. Advance Mission in Sudan with the goal of helping to ensure a lasting peace. It was quickly recognized that mine-affected roads greatly curtailed relief efforts and prevented development aid from reaching its destination, also hampering the movement of goods and activities and affect- ing the food supply of more than two million people.

The RONCO Response

In the wake of these conditions, in May 2005, the United Nations contracted RONCO to provide the mine-action ca- pacity necessary to support its programs. In response, RONCO deployed two international clearance teams to conduct emergency clearance tasks and a training team to develop a Sudanese demining/ explosive ordnance disposal capacity in Wau and Malakal. Local capacity was to be developed in the following areas:

- Emergency EOD
- Mine clearance
- Battle-area clearance
- Stockpile and roadclearance
- RONCO was uniquely prepared to quickly respond to the United Nations’ needs, having extensive experience creating and deploying its Quick Reaction Demining Force, a Mozambique-based team developed to respond to the many tasks on short not- ice. RONCO initially deployed this force to Wau in 2005, following the ceasefire agreement, where it greatly added the safe return of internally displaced persons and increased the flow of humanitarian assis- tance through the Nuba Mountains. But the 2005 Sudanese deployment necessitated a more permanent force and the rapid de- velopment of local capacity. RONCO’s as- sistance included a management team, two international clearance teams and two train- ing teams—each complete with medical and support staff, interpreters and all adminis- trative, technical and logistical resources required. In just one month, this force was fully operational.

It had established a Kudru, the population grew from 1 to 90, significant increases that illustrate the impor- tance of RONCO training of local nationals for the return of internally displaced persons and their pre-dawn travel to the training/work sites. These precautionary detentions were impacting RONCO’s ability to train and operate. In response, RONCO’s training ele- ment for its local nationals to vouch for their immunity.

Supply challenges. Keeping operations supplied is hardly routine in Sudan, as road access throughout much of the area is dif- ficult due to inadequate infrastructure, secu- rity issues, the presence of landmines and weather conditions, particularly during the rainy season. Supply operations in Malakal proved especially difficult, as there is no road access to the city, necessitating the airlifting or bargeing of supplies down the Nile—a five-day trip from the nearest port, Kosti. In addition, the limited road access be- tween Wau and Rumbek and the total lack of access between Rumbek and Juba also make air transport a necessity, even though it is ex- pensive and, in Sudan, unreliable, sporadic and often impossible. A consequence of severe fuel and its price was doubled.

RONCO’s supply challenges didn’t end there. Getting supplies into the coun- try has proven challenging: the Khuramush customs authority continues to be slow in releasing shipments, not only for RONCO but for the United Nations and others. In- country construction materials such as steel are expensive to transport, and bricks are smaller and of lesser quality than elsewhere. Gasoline has been of poor quality and very expensive, averaging as much as US$5.50 per liter (US$20.82 per gallon).

Weather and disease. Weather is a major factor in Sudan, and it can severely hamper operations. The dasrinc conditions, reaching more than 122 F. During 2003, exces- sive heat precluded operations for 14 days in June, 10 days in July, 21 days in August, and 20 days in September. During the rainy season, dirt roads turn to a thick mud, slow- ing operations to a crawl and hampering the mobility of all vehicles.

The terrain in southern Sudan also lends itself to flooding. The ground is flat and virtually no natural drainage, and the soil saturates quickly, resulting in standing water even during the brief periods when it is not raining. At times, some areas have been under as much as six to 10 inches of standing water. In Malakal in particular, the mud made operations almost impossible and forced RONCO’s staff to evacuate, from August through November, forcing the reso- lution of RONCO’s local nationals from Malakal to the Nuba Mountains. While flooding was not quite as bad in Rumbek, RONCO operations there were shut down due to weather for more than 40 days in 2005. Bruce Burnett, RONCO’s Chief of Party in Sudan, summed up the underlying difficulties of the country’s weather: “In the wet season, nothing moves; and in the dry season, the ground is very hard, making deserts extremely challenging.”

Disease, particularly malaria, is also a serious problem in Sudan—a problem exacerbated by the general lack of adequate medical facilities throughout the area. Infection, security authorities were in the area impacting RONCO’s operations on a daily basis.

In Sudan

Based on their long history of operat- ing in austere environments, most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, RONCO’s teams were prepared for the challenges of operat- ing in a remote and hostile environment. Nevertheless, operations in southern Sudan proved far from routine, and the difficulties of secu- rity, supply, lack of transportation, and the inhospitable weather proved to be a persistent challenge to RONCO operations in the country.

Security concerns. The Lord’s Resistance Army, a rebel group that routinely crosses the border from Uganda into southern Sudan, was a major concern during clearance operations in the area. The group recently ambushed a Sudanese Demining Force convoy near Juba and killed two deminers. As a result of this incident and a continued LRA presence in the area, RONCO was directed to discontinue its forward camp and fall back to its base camp at Juba until the situation stabilized. A num- ber of incidents and the lack of security, in turn, offset the number of cleared landmines.

In order to respond to the LRA threat, RONCO deployed its South Sudan mine action team to develop a Sudanese demining/ explosive ordnance disposal team in Juba until the situation stabilized. A number of incidents and the lack of security, in turn, offset the number of cleared landmines.

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