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GERBERA: Mine Action Activities in Vietnam and Laos

By Lisa M. Vanada, MAIC

Overview of GERBERA

The GERBERA demining organization was founded in 1994 to provide three main services: EOD activities in Germany, where the organization is based; international EOD and demining assistance; and local and international special engineer services, which include the surveillance and cleanup of any kind of environmental waste. Although GERBERA often cooperates with humanitarian associations and local governments, it is equipped to deal with every facet of a mine clearance project.

Resettlement and Relocation in Vietnam

Over 25 years ago, villagers in the Quang Tri province of Vietnam were evacuated during the Vietnam War. These villagers abandoned their farms and homes for a military base situated in a nearby river valley. However, this situation was far from optimal because the river floods twice a year, limiting the agricultural success of the evacuees. In spite of the poor farming conditions, the villagers remained on the base; UXO contamination prevented them from returning to their homelands. A German NGO based in Berlin recognized the need for a resettlement program and began the process of preparing the land for the villagers’ return.

In May of 1998, GERBERA began mapping the two villages in the districts of Cam Lo and Ai Tu. After methodically clearing 171 hectares of over 5,000 UXO, the villagers were finally allowed to return to their lands.

In an attempt to escape the UXO contamination of their land, villagers in Vietnam’s Hue province migrated south to the Cau Hai lagoon. Approximately 5,000 peasants currently live on boats and attempt to make their living fishing in the overcrowded lagoon. The area is overpopulated and the constant fishing has expended the natural resources. The fish they catch are pathetically small; the biggest are only 5 cm long and most of the local wildlife was displaced. Vogt explains the situation as “not only a social problem, but an environmental one.” In 1999, GERBERA began surveying land designated for the relocation of the lagoon residents. It began removing UXO in July 2000 and has presently cleared enough land for 40 families.
Family training school in Dressen. All employees must receive their licenses from this school, and Vogt describes this license as a 'higher degree' for EOD workers.

GERBERA designed a system requiring each project to complete a test field. The test field begins as a completely cleared piece of land: any objects or minerals that will cause the mine detectors to signal are removed. Next they carefully map and create defined signal sites where metal pieces are inserted at different pre-determined depths. All metal detectors must complete these test fields on a weekly basis, and every detector is graded for the detection accuracy of every signal site.

The consistent test for detection and depth allows the handlers to notice slight changes, as the grades are compared for any alterations. Frequent evaluation of tests and results allows workers to determine even slight technical aberrations. Vogt explains the importance of this early detection. "It's very easy to realize if a technical instrument breaks down completely," he says. "But very often it's not a sudden breakdown but [it] goes slowly. It's a process of using this test field, we can realize very early if such a weakness occurs."

Training

As a German-based organization, GERBERA has a training advantage: Germany requires all civilian workers in EOD companies to complete an EOD training school in Dressen. All employees must receive their licenses from this school, and Vogt describes this license as a 'higher degree' for EOD workers.

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without obtaining this license. GERBERA uses the material from this German EOD school to train local workers they hire for specific projects. The training the workers receive depends on the tasks they will be assigned and the requirements of the local government.

In Laos, all workers complete basic UXO and landmine training in UXO-Lao's National Training School based in Vientiane. The United States founded this school. Special Forces teams from the Pacific Forces train the local deminers.

GERBERA also provides training for specific project assignments and tasks; this specialized training often includes regional Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and an introduction to the culture. The task has been simplified over the years through standardization. When the demining activities began, every organization had its own SOPs that GERBERA contractors needed to learn. Eventually SOPs were standardized, and they are currently unified for Laos. In Vietnam, the training system most accommodate the Vietnamese government's regulations. Only the higher-ranking officers are permitted to receive the advanced training, but basic training is provided daily for the lower-ranking Vietnamese officers and soldiers. Basic training includes instructions for removing the normal technology, the difference in the technology between mine clearance and UXO clearance, safety procedures, technical procedures, requirements for quality control inspections, and standard GERBERA rules and regulations. The high-ranking officers receive special training on fuses, ammunition and demolition work, equipment handling and maintenance.

UXO Lao classes on mine awareness and safety education. Although some of the members are already teachers, they are all taught basic teaching skills and methods for increasing mine awareness. Team members are taught to accompany their teaching sessions with diagrams, pictures, illustrations and puppet shows targeted at children.

In Laos, the GERBERA Community Awareness Team found it necessary to teach adults and children alike not to make an open fire in the woods without first checking the soil. After the occurrence of several different incidents involving villagers who died cultivating new farmland, the team incorporated lessons teaching the villagers not to cultivate new land before the area is cleared.

Mine education in Vietnam is conducted with the cooperation of the schools. The GERBERA Community Awareness Team contacts teachers to schedule mine education sessions. Team members frequently revise sessions to incorporate information pertinent to local situations or perspectives. Shortly after GERBERA arrived in Vietnam, the Community Awareness Team developed an educational program to address the dangers of scrap metal collecting. Many Vietnamese men gathered grenades and UXO to sell as scrap metal, but often their crude digging tools and inexperience led to injuries and death. The teaching sessions were most successful when they focused on educating the women and children. The women could often persuade their husbands and sons to stop recovering scrap metal.

Continued Diligence

Vogt emphasized that the adherence to structured project assessments, quality control regulations, equipment assessments and promotion of mine education and awareness is not limited to the projects in Laos and Vietnam. GERBERA personnel are required to complete advanced training in services ranging from mine detection, mapping, and mine neutralization and clearance, to mine awareness education and local training. Because they offer a wide range of skills and knowledge, GERBERA personnel are often called upon to provide specific assistance for international demining programs, in addition to entire project assignments. As long as humanitarian organizations and local and international governments and associations continue to acknowledge and address mine contamination problems, GERBERA plans to continue their mine action and their efforts to cleanse the environment.

Much of the content for this article has been gathered from an interview with Lutz Vogt, the General Manager for GERBERA. Vogt is responsible for GERBERA's demining and UXO clearance activities and has participated in the projects described in this article.

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