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U.S. Efforts Strengthen Pledge to Vietnam

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund estimates that 2,000 Vietnamese are killed each year by mines and UXO. In response to this, the U.S. government, VVMF and Clear Path International are focusing on the country’s landmine victims.

By Stacy L. Smith, MAIC

In November 2000, former President Bill Clinton traveled to Vietnam to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. At a ceremony honoring efforts to clear an estimated 3 million landmines and 300,000 tons of UXO scattered throughout Vietnam, Clinton vowed to help remove mine threats in Vietnam, Africa and the Balkans. He said: “You will have America’s support until you have found every landmine and every piece of unexploded ordnance. This is a tragedy for which peace produces no answer.”

In June 2000, the U.S. government allocated $3.1 million (U.S.) to support humanitarian demining efforts in Vietnam. Of this total, $1.7 million will go towards the purchase of equipment such as vehicles, personal safety gear and landmine/UXO detectors. $1.4 million will be designated for a level one national survey to determine the scope of the landmine problem and make recommendations for resolving in $200,000 will be allotted to develop a computer system to record the locations and types of ordnance used during the Vietnam War, and $80,000 will be used for a computer system to assist the Vietnamese in managing their demining program.

Following Clinton’s promise to rid Vietnam of landmines, two non-profit organizations, Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and Clear Path International, introduced projects intended to stop the deaths of innocent civilians from escalating. Currently, an average of six deaths occur daily in Vietnam as a result of landmines/UXO.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund

Project RENEW

On Dec. 4, 2000, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) revealed a plan to form the first-ever comprehensive program targeted at saving lives and preventing injuries in Vietnam. The two-year pilot project in Quang Tri District of Vietnam’s Quang Tri province is designed “to restore the use of lands of the Vietnamese through education and neutralization of the effects of the Vietnam War.” The non-profit organization’s model for landmine/UXO clearance is called Project RENEW. According to Jan C. Scruggs, VVMF president, Project RENEW combines the efforts of several international NGOs, including PeaceTrees Vietnam, Catholic Relief Services and Counterpart International, with the Quang Tri Province People’s Committee.

“Vietnamese deminers to carry out the clearance and victim assistance. We were told time and time again that a single comprehensive effort was needed,” Scruggs said. With the help of international NGOs and the Quang Tri Province People’s Committee, Project RENEW will accomplish its all-inclusive goal through mine education and awareness, mine clearance, land restocking and victim assistance. “We feel that by several different groups helping with this effort, we will be able to make significant progress in a shorter amount of time and the people of Quang Tri will benefit significantly from the collaborative system,” Scruggs said.

Assessing the Situation

According to a Dec. 4, 2000, VVMF press release, Vietnamese officials estimate that approximately 2,000 civilian deaths result each year from landmines/UXO. Since the end of the war in 1975, approximately 40,000 civilian deaths have been caused by landmines/UXO with nearly 1,500 of those occurring in Titus Phong District. VVMF hopes that Project RENEW will reduce the risks that landmines/UXO pose to civilians.

In the early planning stages of the program, VVMF met with officials from international NGOs, the Vietnamese government, and the U.S. Department of State to discuss Vietnam’s landmine/UXO problem. “We were told time and time again that a single comprehensive effort was needed,” Scruggs said. With the help of international NGOs and the Quang Tri Province People’s Committee, Project RENEW will accomplish its all-inclusive goal through mine education and awareness, mine clearance, land restocking and victim assistance. “We feel that by several different groups helping with this effort, we will be able to make significant progress in a shorter amount of time and the people of Quang Tri will benefit significantly from the collaborative system,” Scruggs said.

Projections

With matching $250,000 grants from the E*TRADE Group, Inc., a global leader in online personal financial services based in Menlo Park, Calif., and the Freeman Foundation in Stone, Va., an office of international cooperation will be established in Quang Tri province as a center for information exchange between all parties. The center will also address potential problems and obstacles arising during the pilot project. If successful, VVMF hopes to implement Project RENEW in other mine-affected countries such as Laos and Cambodia. “We have a lot of work to do in Vietnam before we move on to other countries,” Scruggs said. “What we hope to have after two years is a useful approach that can easily be implemented in other affected areas.”

Clear Path International

Current Projects

In December 2000, Clear Path International began a two-year project in Vietnam that will clear 125 acres of land for later construction of housing in Dong Ha Town, Quang Tri province. During the Vietnam War, the clearance site head-quartered the U.S. 3rd Marine Division and was known as Dong Ha Combat Base. According to Martha Hathaway, project director for Vietnam, this project will eliminate the fears of local children and their families. “For 30 years, the people of Vietnam have lived with the threat of landmines and bombs in their communities,” she said. “Clear Path International hopes to remove these obstacles that stand in the way of the health and safety of children in Vietnam.” The project hopes to rid the area of the threat of landmines/UXO on two levels: mine clearance and victim assistance.

Mine clearance will be executed with the help of UXB International, a commercial humanitarian demining company in Ashburn, Va. UXB International will provide management, technical supervision, equipment and accommodations for demining teams. It will also train local Vietnamese deminers to carry out the clearance of landmines and UXO using safe techniques and procedures. Hathaway believes that a methodical demining process is key to a successful clearance project. She said, “Clear Path International believes that the most paramount concerns are safety and quality, and in order to ensure safety and quality the process of clearance is time and resource intensive.”

In addition to the clearance project, Clear Path International is also working to facilitate accident survivors in the area. While the organization primarily benefits children who have sustained debilitating injuries as a result of landmine or UXO explosions, the program also provides monetary compensation to the families of affected children. Through the support of

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the Committee for the Care and Protection of Children. Clear Path International is able to give injured children emergency medical treatment, surgery, long-term health care, nutritional support and special scholarships. Funding for this project was received from a grant from the Freeman Foundation and contributions from individuals and foundations such as the Franci Finlay Foundation.

The Mission

Clear Path International is a non-profit organization founded in September 2000. Its efforts are concentrated in the war-torn countries of Southeast Asia. The goals of the organization include raising awareness of the landmine/UXO problem, providing money and resources for demining and victim assistance projects, and sponsoring programs to remove landmines/UXO and assist victims of landmine/UXO explosions. Through these goals, Clear Path International hopes to accomplish its mission: to clear obstacles that stand in the way of the health, safety and development of children and their families.

A Plan for the Future

Clear Path International hopes to empower local residents and agencies in mine-affected countries by creating "an in-country capacity that can sustain the demining and victim assistance activities well into the future, independently or with minimal support from the international community." By involving local residents and agencies from the start, "a handover of management and implementation of the project(s) to a team of qualified domestic deminers with only periodic technical monitoring from the contractor, but with the presence of a full-time Clear Path International representative" is possible. For the time being, Clear Path International's efforts on behalf of the health, safety and development of mine-affected children and their families will be limited to Vietnam and Cambodia. In the future, the organization hopes to expand its project scope to Laos and Thailand.

Conclusion

While President Clinton's pledge to the Vietnamese government has led to dedicated efforts to rid Vietnam of landmines/UXO, the Bush administration has yet to make a statement on the future of U.S. involvement in landmine policy. Before leaving office, Clinton commented on the progress of his administration and encouraged the Bush administration to maintain U.S. efforts. "While I am proud that we have made substantial progress towards eliminating the threat landmines pose to innocent civilians around the world," Clinton wrote on Jan. 19, 2001, "there is work yet to be done. I urge the next administration to build on our progress and take the steps necessary to allow the United States to eventually sign the Ottawa Convention, while still meeting our security needs and protecting our men and women in uniform."

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Photos c/o WMF, CPI and MAIC

RHINO in Cambodia

RHINO, a large and powerful demining tool geared towards large clearance operations, has been put to the test—both on testing grounds and in the field. The result: a level of performance and operability that alleviates the concerns of critics.

By Manfred Joehnk, Program Manager

Background

The mechanical demining system RHINO was developed internally by Rheinmetall Landsysteme GmbH (RLS) in Kiel, Germany, to provide a more cost effective and safe demining tool. It is superior to existing systems in terms of efficiency, safety and cleaning capacity and is especially well suited for large area demining operations. RHINO is large (9.5 m long, 3.1 m wide and 3.5 m high), powerful (660 kW caterpillar engine), robust (weights 58 metric tons) and is fully remotely controlled. RHINO is a serious demining machine, as opposed to a mechanical machine whose purpose is to assist the manual deminers.

This article summarizes RHINO and the user experience during a field test and subsequent demining task conducted in Cambodia from August 1999 to May 2000. The test and the accompanying demining task in support of CARE took place in two remote areas in Battambang province. The main objective of the task was to accelerate the demining process to help accommodate the need for land for returning refugees. This was a major two-year project involving the resettlement of approximately 4,000 families.

The Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC), a state run organization, is responsible for the conduct of mine clearance actions. The CMAC staff is assisted by international advisors from the United Nations and NGOs, as well as soldiers from countries such as Canada, Australia, Belgium and the Netherlands. The test and subsequent demining action were managed and performed by CMAC with the technical assistance of two RLS employees. After the initial training, their role was mainly to provide further training on the job for tasks such as unscheduled maintenance. Mine clearing in Cambodia represents a serious challenge. The environmental conditions are tropical and severe. The infrastructure is typical of a developing country. The mine problem itself is further complicated by the fact that there are numerous types of mines and UXOs, and poorly marked mine-infested areas.

Operation by Indigenous Personnel

Training on RHINO began when it arrived by barge at Sihanoukville. The RLS technicians trained three mechanics and two electricians in the operation and maintenance of RHINO. While lacking theoretical knowledge, the trainees were skilled workers and eager to learn. In a few short days they could handle the day-to-day operations and, soon after, maintenance of the vehicle. In a few weeks, they operated the system without the oversight of the RLS technicians. The five trainees were organized in two operation/maintenance teams of two, each with the fifth being responsible for supply operations.

The challenge of leading the demining platoon was given to a CMAC technician who was assisted by a former leader of a mine marking team. They were initially trained and supervised by a French technical advisor. Manual deminers, drivers and guards rounded out the team. The platoon not only clearly demonstrated that indigenous personnel could operate and maintain RHINO, but that they also work hard and perform in a highly proficient manner throughout the initial test and subsequent tasks.