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Update: The Mine Action Situation in Afghanistan

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RCONO: Back in Afghanistan

More than ten years after helping develop its demining capability, RCONO returns to Afghanistan, renewing old partnerships to tackle new problems.

by JJ Scott, MAIC

The Return

As part of their Integrated Mine Action Support (IMAS) contract with the U.S. State Department, demining company RCONO has returned to Afghanistan to carry out two new task orders. Ten years ago, RCONO helped develop Afghanistan's indigenous demining capacity. This time around, with only two dozen employees in the country, RCONO is taking more of a management/support role rather than conducting heavy-duty demining with their own resources. Mr. Dave Lundberg, a RCONO Vice President, says, "There's real talent, real capability over there. We're just helping the Afghans do what they do in a more effective, updated manner." This attitude of cooperation instead of domination allows RCONO to work much more efficiently with the Afghan people to complete the State Department's new tasks. One of the tasks is purely humanitarian while the other involves joint international military objectives. Both are outlined below.

Task Order 1

Under the first task order, RCONO is providing commodities, advice and assistance to Regional Mine Action Centers (REMACs) throughout Afghanistan. Mr. Lundberg expects that "since the bombing campaign, there is a lot of new UXO where they don't know how to handle," so RCONO will conduct several training sessions to educate the Afghans on the new threats facing their country. RCONO is working closely with the UN and the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan (UNOCHA), but is responsible to the State Department. This arrangement allows maximum efficiency while ensuring that State Department objectives are achieved. Team members arrived in Afghanistan in January 20 and are scheduled to remain for 6 months in compliance with the task order. RCONO deployed 13 people under Task Order 1, including one task leader and RMAC Advisor and EOD/demining technicians. Another EOD technician will alternate RCONO deployed one senior dog manager to Afghanistan to check up on the dog center (which RCONO founded in the early 1990s with U.S. government funds). "These are all highly trained individuals. Seven of the 11 people are EOD certified specialists," Mr. Lundberg informed me. Another large segment of Task Order 1 is delivery of over $1 million in equipment to the UN's general Mine Action Program (MAP). Needed commodities include ambulances and other transport equipment, magnetic detectors and other demining supplies.

Task Order 2

While Task Order 1 focuses primarily on humanitarian demining, Task Order 2 leans more toward military demining alongside the International Coalition. This Task is significantly smaller in scale than Task Order 1, though just as vital. The State Department, in conjunction with U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), tasked RCONO to provide quality assurance around the two major airports used by Coalition forces in Afghanistan. In response to State Department directives, RCONO brought eight of their own mine detecting dogs (MDDs) along with their handlers into Afghanistan to execute this Task. The dogs will search for landmines and provide quality assurance around the airports in hopes that they can prevent more mine accidents from claiming Coalition victims. A senior RCONO manager and experienced dog trainer accompanied the team to oversee all work done under Task Order 2.

Cooperation

Mr. Lundberg explained that RCONO has enjoyed such a warm reception from the Afghans because the company is intimately familiar with the country and its demining organizations. Some of the RCONO personnel sent to complete these new Task Orders are veterans of the Afghanistan MAP, so they are renewing old friendships with their Afghan counterparts while they work. Instead of taking over, we like to form a partnership with the Afghan demining community. We trained a lot of the demining players in Afghanistan, so there is almost a homecoming feeling to our return," Mr. Lundberg says.

Conclusion

By building on the unique relationship that RCONO and Afghanistan have forged over the years, RCONO hopes to quickly upgrade Afghan planning and demining capabilities, rapidly clear UXO and landmines, and help the country bring land back into agricultural production. Once again, RCONO will help the stoic Afghan people reclaim their land, leading to a safer and more prosperous nation.

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Impact and Losses

Now that airstrikes and Taliban raids no longer threaten the lives of mine action workers, the mine action community has begun to realize exactly how much the halt in operations has set back the mine action program. Afghanistan already contained anywhere from seven

on p 80. As a result, all mine action programs are working to retrain personnel and fully resume operations as quickly as possible.
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amount of donor support, in order to re­
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operations, in order to prepare for these
artilleries.  Furthermore, workers will be
in the area. As reported in mid-January,
artillery operations. The United Kingdom
military contribution that may have left on Afghani territory,
have to be directed to safe settlement ar­
threat of Taliban forces no longer exists.
progress on the events of the
sanctioning the clearance of UXO
and the influx of movement throughout the
country, mine awareness programs
reached their target. In order to
continue the recovery in the

Donor Support
MAPA has received a significant
amount of donor support, in order to re­
plenish lost supplies and further build its
programs to handle newly imposed threats in
the area. As reported in mid-January,
the anticipated budget for fully
restoring the mine action programs in Afghanistan
totaled $47 million (U.S.), with a
smaller than $9 million still outstanding. All
requests are treated as gifts and are
directed to specific programs
based on donor requests.

A number of the necessary funds were
secured in response to the International
Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan, held in Tokyo, Japan,
in January 21 and 22. Japan donated $15.4
million to replenish equipment and
staff and $2.8 million to coordinating programs.
The European Commission
designated $10 million towards survey,
clearance and training efforts. The United States
budgeted $7 million for deploy­
ing EOD experts and replacing equip­
ment as well as for implementing train­
ing, mine awareness and NGO clearance operations. Additional funds were appro­
riated from Australia, Bulgaria, France, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Resuming Operations
After looking over the events of the
past six months and considering the im­
 pact they have left on Afghan territory,
mine action officials plan to restore and
further expand all mine action programs
over the course of this year, continuing
to make MAPA one of the most efficient
and cost-effective mine action programs in the
world. As of January 15, 2002, all 15
minesweeping companies working in conjunction with MAPA have
returned to the country, resuming up to
90 percent of mine action activities.
Currently, the priorities of mine ac­
tion are being re-evaluated to address the
latest needs. These priorities include:
• Recovering lost equipment from air
strikes and Taliban attacks on NGO
offices.
• Retraining personnel.
• Resuming the survey and verifica­
tion of infected territory.
• Assisting emergency response teams
throughout the country.

Although the full extent is unknown at the
time, landmine/UXO-related in­
juries have increased dramatically since
September as a result of new hazards
and an increase in movement through­
out the country. Until this threat is re­
moved, the country cannot be fully re­
habilitated. Consequently, clearing
landmines, in order to assist relief orga­
nizations, has become a top priority in Afghanistan.

Most mine action workers have been
briefed and trained on the new hazards
presented by recent conflicts. Additional
minesweeping companies have been
structured to continue preparing mine action personnel for the
latest threats. A Landmine Impact Survey (LIS) will be
conducted during the week of November 7, 2001.
These broadcasts informed civilians of the
counter bomb problem and provided them with the necessary information for
distinguishing between the cluster bombs and
target packages.

Outside Assistance
In order to fully implement the nec­
cessary mine action programs, a number
of international and expert NGO
teams have arrived in Afghanistan. These teams include HELP INTERSOS,
RONGO and the Mine Action
Clearing Promises (MAPP) and the
Mines Advisory Group (MAG).
In addition, the United Nations is
still looking for two or three ex­
pertized mine action workers to
help implement programs in the
northern region of the country, where they were pre­
viously prohibited from working.

Proving Awareness
As always, providing awareness to Afghan civilians, especially refugees and
IDPs moving back to their homes, is a
key component of the mine action pro­
gram. As a result of the newly imposed
minesweeps and the influx of movement throughout the
country, mine awareness programs
have also had to be restruct­
tured. Once an area has been surveyed,
cleared and verified, refugees and IDPs
have to be directed to safe settlement ar­
as and equipped with the capability to
find food, water and other necessities in
the area. Many of the relief organizations
have provided mine awareness programs in
the area, and the community as a
whole now understands the
potential danger.

Cluster bombs resemble the threat of
pack­ages that were also dropped in the
area, they pose a significant threat to cit­
civilians who are desperate for food. As
a result of the UNICEF Save the Children
and various other organizations have worked
in conjunction with British Broadcast Coa­
ration (BBC) to spread awareness by ra­
dio broadcast throughout Afghanistan
during the week of November 7, 2001.
These broadcasts informed civilians of the
counter bomb problem and provided them with the necessary information for
distinguishing between the cluster bombs and
bomb packages.

Conclusion
The United Nations Office for Co­
norrelation Assistance (UNOCHA) esti­
mates that as of May 2002, 100 million dollars in
economic revenue has been lost due to
landmine/UXO hindrances in the past 12
years, prior to September 2001. Fortu­
nately, Afghanistan hosts one of the most
effective and cost-efficient mine action
programs in the world, returning an av­
crage of $4.60 for every dollar spent. Now
that security conditions have been restored
and operations are almost back in full swing,
the aid agencies of Afghanistan have begun
helping the country move on.

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