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The U.S. Humanitarian Mine Action Program in Iraq

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funds and eliminate the threat. The international answer was fast and appropriate, with a substantial economic pledge and the professionalism of five major international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These specialized in humanitarian clearance in general and, more specifically, in the problem of CBUs. According to experts operating with the UN Mine Action Centre in Kosovo (MACA), no other country has conducted similar operations to the ones adopted by the UN Mine Action Centre in Kosovo and the International Committee of the Red Cross (Guy). With the help of CBUs clearing operations in Kosovo, we found 513 unexploded BL-97s (43 percent of the total). With 80 percent of the area cleared, we found 484 unexploded BL-97s (60 percent of the total).

The threat of CBUs in the Balkans is not only a problem in Kosovo. In the Republic of Serbia, for example, UXO remains everywhere—even in public gardens—in the Kosovo Mine Action Unit's (KOMA) area. In June 2001, experts provided approximately 60 Schonstedt detectors to the Afghan NGO partner and trained these BAC teams to use them properly and efficiently. In fact, a matter of primary importance is to conduct humanitarian clearance of these affected territories, which means areas needing to be 99.6 percent clear, as international standards dictate. This kind of clearance involves great costs and long-term funding from the international community, but it's worthwhile in terms of saving human lives.

Therefore, we believe that the international community should pay much more attention to every country affected by CBUs, as a global and humanitarian justice. And mostly, we believe that the international community should address this issue of possible further use of CBUs in upcoming conflicts, as in Iraq.

All graphics courtesy of the author.

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The United States government has developed a wide-ranging plan to build an indigenous mine action capability within Iraq. The plan will help rid Iraq of the threat of landmines and UXO so that the country can focus on rebuilding its society.

by the United States
Humanitarian Mine Action Program

Imagine growing up in a country where you had to live with the sounds of gunfire and the glow of missiles keeping you awake at night. Imagine the overwhelming feeling of joy when these terrors ended. Imagine wanting to run freely among your friends, but not being able to, because of the dangerous objects that lay around your neighborhood long after the war is over. Iraq is such a country; now, more than ever, needs an organized, well-developed program to remove these threatening objects. In order to help provide this humanitarian assistance, the United States government has developed a robust and wide-ranging plan to build an indigenous mine action capability within the country. The plan will help rid Iraq of the threat of landmines and UXO. With the help of the United States, the United Nations, and other countries around the world, Iraq will be able to foresee the end of its humanitarian problem and focus on rebuilding its society.

The Landmine/UXO Problem

Iraq has been the victim of violent conflict throughout its history, which, in recent years, has left the land plagued with landmines and UXO, disrupting the social, economic and environmental development of the country. Before Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), an estimated 10-15 million landmines were deployed in Iraq, dating from conflicts as far back as World War II, with the majority of the landmines laid during the Iran/Iraq War from 1980 to 1988. International observers consider that landmines present a clear risk in Iraq, but a more significant threat is posed by UXO. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported in 2001 that UXO from previous conflicts has constituted the major humanitarian threat for the past several years in northern Iraq, along the border with Iran, as well as a throughout central and southern Iraq. The problem is now exacerbated by the widespread presence of abandoned munitions and unexploded remnants from the most recent conflicts.

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Department of State’s (DOS) 1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the Iraqi government declared demining subservient, claiming that such activity violated Security Council resolutions on the need to respect Iraq’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. Iraqi officials ordered workers performing demining activities to leave Iraq, and denied visas to mine action personnel trying to enter the country. The United Nations and many NGOs ignored the order and continued their dangerous work.

Before the current conflict, mine contamination was estimated to affect over 1,000 communities, with reported accidents caused by mines/UXOs occurring at an average rate of 31 per month. Since March 20, 2003, the number of casualties has increased significantly. According to Mines Advisory Group (MAG) there have been over 400 casualties in the northern governorates alone.

Much less is known about the landmine problem in the south and central regions of Iraq. Borders with Iran are heavily mined, and the locations of the minefields are generally known. Beyond that, there were reports of Iraqi laying mines prior to the most recent conflict, but there is little evidence to suggest that this was widespread. Media reports suggesting extensive artillery and aerial bombardment has contributed to the already significant UXO problem throughout the country, particularly in the central region.

The ICRC has carried out MRE programs in 14 governorates and trained 200 volunteers. In Baghdad, the World Food Program began distributing MRE information with all food deliveries beginning June 1, 2003. These efforts are supported by other MRE efforts from various NGOs, the United Nations and the Coalition Information Operations, which includes messages concerning MRE.

United States Assistance

The United States began mine action assistance to Iraq in 2002, through separate grants to the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and the Norwegian Peoples Aid (NPA). The grants, totaling $2,160,138, were awarded by the State Department’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs to support clearance efforts in the northern governorates.

Currently, the United States government is implementing a robust three-year plan to reduce the threat of landmines/UXO in Iraq after OIF. The Iraqi Relief Supplemental, enacted by Congress in April 2003, provides funding for this project. The plan includes the following initiatives: MRE, the Quick Reaction Demining Force (QRDF), building capacities for mine action coordination and demining operations and expanding existing mine/UXO clearance capabilities.

Mine Risk Education

The United States is developing a substantial MRE program throughout Iraq with MAG as the implementing partner. As envisioned, MAG has positioned ten MRE teams in various regions of Iraq. These teams will work with community-based organizations and media to deliver MRE messages throughout the country.

The DOS, in conjunction with UNICEF, has procured MRE materials for use by NGO conducting MRE programs at locations with populations that are highly at risk due to UXOs/landmines. The materials consist of MRE boards, flyers and posters, and have been distributed in Basra and Baghdad as of June 2003.

The Quick Reaction Demining Force (QRDF)

The QRDF deployed from its home base, Masqatimes, on May 2, 2003, to work on high priority demining operations in Iraq. The force is split into four teams each consisting of six team leaders, one mine detection dog handler, one engineer, one mine detection dog handler, and two mine detection dogs (MDDs). The deployment is anticipated to last approximately four months, and is being implemented by RONCO Consulting Corporation, the State Department’s demining contractor. Actual clearance operations began on May 8, 2003, in the region of Al Hillah and Baghdad. Over 3,700 sq m in two minefields have been cleared, as well as over 716,770 sq m of UXO-infested land. The QRDF has also completed building the first field explosives storage bunker constructed by a civilian organization in Iraq.

Mine Action Coordination

To build an indigenous capacity for the management and coordination of mine action, the Department of State will support the establishment and development of the Iraqi National Mine Action Authority (INMAA) and an Iraq National Mine Action Center (INMAC). DOS will recruit, train and equip local personnel to assume these responsibilities. DOS and Department of Defense (DOD) have deployed mine action experts to advise the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), as well as local and national authorities, on matters relevant to the establishment of this capacity and to liaise with UNSCENTOM, the United Nations, NGOs and other organizations, as appropriate.

Expanding Existing Capacity

The DOS will take advantage of the existing mine action capacity in Iraq, which will cut back on the amount of necessary training and equipping. The plan incorporates four MAG demining teams, each consisting of 22 deminers, to support mine clearance requirements outside of northern Iraq. All mine clearance tasks and plans will be in accordance with priority tasks from the INMAC.

Demining Operations Capacity Building

The State Department plans to task RONCO Consulting Corporation to train four teams each consisting of 12 deminers, one medic, one team leader, two dog handlers and two mine detection dogs (MDDs). The deployment is anticipated to last approximately four months, and is being implemented by RONCO Consulting Corporation, the State Department’s demining contractor. Actual clearance operations began on May 8, 2003, in the region of Al Hillah and Baghdad. Over 3,700 sq m in two minefields have been cleared, as well as over 716,770 sq m of UXO-infested land. The QRDF has also completed building the first field explosives storage bunker constructed by a civilian organization in Iraq.

Mine Action Authority

The present lack of an indigenous mine clearing capability does not preclude an operational capability now. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) is acknowledged as the relevant authority in Iraq with respect to mine action. UNSCENTOM has established a Mine Explosive Ordnance Disposal Coordination Center to provide data interface between the military clearing and the United Nations mine action authority. CPA has established an Emergency Mine Action Team (EMAT) staffed by representatives from the Departments of State and Defense to satisfy the Coalition Force Commander’s objectives and establish mine action policy and to coordinate mine actions projects throughout the country. EMAT will work closely with the mine action service providers and the United Nations mine action structure. The plan envisions transitioning responsibilities as the relevant authority for mine action to an Iraqi National Mine Action Authority as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Even though the Iraq Mine Action Plan was just initiated and implemented in recent months, there have been many noteworthy accomplishments. Once all programs become fully operational, the people of Iraq can look forward to a day when they will be able to walk the earth in safety.

*All images courtesy of the author.