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Opportunities for Regional Cooperation in Mine Action in Southeastern Europe

by Ian Mansfield, Operations Director, GICHD

Introduction
At many of the international conferences held over the past years dealing with landmine issues, the meeting conclusions invariably contained a call for a greater regional approach to address landmine problems. In most cases these were just words, and at first glance there was little evidence of regional cooperation in mine action, or that such an approach would bring any immediate benefits to mine-affected communities.

The reason for this lack of a regional approach is partly due to the nature of the landmine problem itself. In general, the mines that have been deployed are buried in the ground and do not move over national borders. This is in contrast to many other problems, which are defined by legal drugs or diseases, which easily move across sovereign boundaries and are thus more suited to a regional basis. In addition, UN resolution dealing with landmines and the UN policy statement that “the primary responsibility for taking action against the presence of landmines lies with the concerned state.” Most donors have policies that reflect the UN resolution, and they fund projects on a country-by-country basis. Lastly, although nations may exist in the region that have had previous and current landmine problems, there has been relatively little cooperation between them, or they often have language and cultural differences, which make a regional approach difficult. For example, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are all in the same region, but they have different languages. The response to the landmine problem in Central America is one example of a regional approach. It has been coordinated by the Organization of American States (OAS), but has tended to be mainly organized on a military-to-military basis, with a focus on mine-clearance. SE Europe (and the Balkans in particular) seems to offer prospects for greater benefit from a regional approach. The Balkan countries have a common history and background, a similar government structure, and most have the same spoken language. Also, dealing with all the aspects of mine action, including mine risk education (MRE), survey and clearance, victim assistance, stockpile destruction and the fulfilment of common Ottawa Treaty obligations, increases the opportunities available for a cooperative response.

Areas of Concern

Political Level
At the political level, there are already a number of organizations that deal with mine action in SE Europe on a regional basis, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Stability Pact. These organizations should be encouraged to develop programmes to strengthen the linkage between mine action and other sectoral responses. Some time ago, the “Ready Group” was formed under the auspices of the Working Table III of the Stability Pact to address the mine situation in the region. While the grouping is still at an initial stage, it has probably yet to reach its full potential. It does bring together senior government officials from the region on a regular basis to discuss political issues relating to landmines.

Another body, the South-east European Mine Action Coordination Committee (SEEMACC) was formed in 2000 and deals with more practical issues of coordination at the operational level. Probably the greatest area for cooperation at this level lies with the AP Mine Ban Convention (or Ottawa Treaty). The goal of a “mine-free Balkans” now seems achievable with the recent announcement of the countries in the region to be the treaty (the last Balkan country to do so). The aim should now be for a “mine-free SE Europe.” All of the obligations of the Convention, including the requirement to clear all mines in 10 years, are achievable in this region.

Strategic Level
At what I would call the strategic level, it is unlikely (or unnecessary) that a regional mine action strategy would be developed for SE Europe. However, it would be useful if the national strategies or action plans developed by the countries contained common elements.

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Strategic Level
At what I would call the strategic level, it is unlikely (or unnecessary) that a regional mine action strategy would be developed for SE Europe. However, it would be useful if all the national strategies or action plans developed by the countries contained common elements. The use of common terminology and standard reporting formats would all improve consistency of operations, and it would be easier to gauge progress. The development of national standards based on the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) would allow for consistency of operations, as would a common accreditation system for mine action operators in the region. For example, if a mine detection dog (MDD) company or a MRE operator is accredited to work in one country, that accreditation should be recognized in another country if it is the same.

Operational Level
Most of the greatest areas for regional cooperation probably exist at the operational level. There is already dialogue between Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro, over the clearance of bordering minefields. Shared use could consist of expensive high technology equipment. For example, if a mine clearing dog (MDD) company had been foreseen for the “Mineseeker” airship after its test in Kosovo, then its cost and work programme could have been distributed among the countries in the region. The allocation of specialist training responsibilities to avoid duplication has also started—two examples include the MDD centre in Bosnia and the underwater demining school in Montenegro. The IMAS can provide a common basis for activities like minefield marking systems, MRE messages, joint purchase of high technology equipment, and the exchange of lessons learned. Greater possibilities exist for regional training, to build on the many mine action courses already conducted by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) through Cranfield University and local partner institutions. Sharing practical skills can be enhanced by more exchanges of national mine action programme staff under the UNDP’s Mine Action Exchange (MAX) programme. Opportunities should be explored for victim assistance activities, such as sporting competitions or cultural exchanges. Sharing medical, prosthetic or psychological services may be an option, but taking people away from family or local support systems needs to be carefully assessed.

Technical Level
At a more technical level, the conduct of joint trials or testing of equipment would result in savings, or at least an approach to share national level test results would help. The recent development by the European standards organization (CEN Working Group) of a standard methodology for metal detector trials should contribute to the fullest extent. With regard to information exchange, the current work by the GICHD on the XML project will allow different databases to “talk” to each other and exchange data. The GICHD is about to launch the database on Demining Accidents (DDAS), which is a mandatory component of national workplace accidents involving deminers from around the world. These reports will thus be exchanged to highlight trends and changes in techniques, equipment or safety issues. A sub-set of this database could focus on accidents in a region to see if any specific problems occur. On a broader level, the setup of the Croatian Mine Action Centre (CROMAC) scientific council to tap into the local scientific community is unique in the world, and possibilities exist to expand this concept to other regions.

Funding
The final area to be considered is funding. The competition for donor funds, national budgets, responsibilities of governments when taking out World Bank loans and the project nature of funding tend not to favour a regional approach. However, the establishment of the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance (ITF) has introduced a new element to this situation in the Balkans. Despite some initial skepticism when it was established in 1998, the ITF has been able to serve as a conduit for other donor funds to the region—mainly due to the dollar-for-dollar matching arrangement with the United States. The fact that the ITF is located in Slovenia (a non-mining country) which has affected country to the region has resulted in an air of neutrality about its operation.
Introduction

At many of the international conferences held over the past years dealing with landmine issues, the meeting conclusions invariably contain a call for a greater regional approach to address landmine problems. In most cases these were just words, and at first glance there was little evidence of regional cooperation in mine action, or that such an approach would bring any immediate benefits to mine-affected communities.

The reason for this lack of a regional approach is partly due to the nature of the landmine problem itself. In general, the mines that have been deployed are buried in the ground and do not move over national borders. This is in contrast to a number of other issues such as drug, local legal drugs or diseases, which easily move across sovereign boundaries and obviously do have a regional nature.

In addition, UN resolutions dealing with landmines and the UN Policy states that “the primary responsibility for taking action against the presence of landmines lies with the concerned state.” Most donors have policies that reflect the UN response, and they fund projects on a country-by-country basis.

Lastly, although nations may exist in the world that do not share land borders, regional legal, cultural differences that make creating a regional approach difficult. For example, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are all in the same region, but they have different languages.

The response to the landmine problem in Central America is one example of a regional approach. It has been coordinated by the Organization of American States (OAS), but has tended to be mainly organized on a military-to-military basis, with a focus on mine clearance. SE Europe (and the Balkans in particular) seems to offer prospects for greater benefits from a regional approach. The Balkan countries have a common history and background, a similar government structure, and more or less the same spoken language. Also, dealing with all the aspects of mine action, including mine risk education (MRE), survey and clearance, victim assistance, stockpile destruction and the fulfillment of common Ottawa Treaty obligations, increases the opportunities available for a cooperative response.

Areas of Concern

Political Level

At the political level, there are already a number of organizations that deal with landmines in SE Europe on a regional basis, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Stability Pact. These organizations should be encouraged to develop programmes to strengthen the linkage between mine action and other sectoral responses. Some countries, for example, the “Reay Group” was formed under the auspices of the Working Table III of the Stability Pact to address the landmine situation. While the group is certainly an important step, it is probably yet to reach its full potential. It does bring together senior government officials from the region on a regular basis to discuss political issues relating to landmines.

Another body, the Southeastern Europian Mine Action Coordination Committee (SEEAMCC) was formed in 2000 and deals with more practical issues of standardization at the operational level. Probably the greatest area for cooperation at this level lies with the AP Mine Ban Convention (or Ottawa Treaty). The goal of a “mine-free Balkans” now seems achievable with the recent announcement by Serbia and Montenegro that it will accede to the Treaty (the last Balkan country to do so). The aim should now be for a “mine-free SE Europe.” All of the obligations of the Convention, including the requirement to clear all mines in 10 years, are achievable in this region.

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At what I would call the strategic level, it is unlikely (or unnecessary) that a regional mine action strategy would be developed for SE Europe. However, it would be useful if all the national strategies or action plans developed by the countries contained common elements. The use of common terminology and standard reporting forms or the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMMSA) developed by the General Coordination Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) would make elaboration of the mine problem more logical, and it would become easier to gauge progress. The development of national standards based on the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) would allow for consistency of operations, as would a common accreditation system for mine action operators in the region.

For example, if a mine detection dog (MDD) company or a MRE operator is accredited to work in one country, that accreditation should be recognized in another country if the system is the same.

Operational Level

A final area for regional coordination probably exist at the operational level. There is already dialogue between Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro, over the clearance of bordering minefields. Shared use could consist of expensive or high-technology equipment. For example, mine remote-use had been foreseen for the “Mineseeker” airship after its test in Kosovo, then its cost and work programme have been dispersed among the countries in the region. The allocation of specialist training responsibilites to avoid duplication has also started—two examples include the MDD centre in Bosnia and the underwater demining school in Montenegro. The IMAS can provide a common basis for activities like minefield marking systems, MRE messages, joint purchase of high-technology equipment and sharing of lessons learned. Greater possibilities exist for regional training, to build on the management training courses already conducted by the UN Development Program (UNDP) through Cranfield University and local partner institutions. Sharing practical skills can be enhanced by more exchanges of national mine action programme staff under the UNDP’s Mine Action Exchange (MAX) programme. Opportunities should be explored for victim assistance activities, such as sporting competitions or cultural exchanges. Shared access to medical, psychosocial or psychological services may be an option, but taking people away from family or local support networks is not a measure that needs to be carefully assessed.

Technical Level

At a more technical level, the conduct of joint trials or testing of equipment will result in savings, or at least an approach to share national level test results would help. The recent development by the European standards organization (CEN Working Group) of a standard methodology for metal detector trials should be used to the fullest extent. With regard to information exchange, the current work by the GIChD on the XML project will allow different databases to “talk” to each other and exchange data. The GIChD is about to expand on the Database of Demining Activities (DMD), which is a method of collecting information on workplace accidents involving deminers from around the world. Reports will be downloaded from the database allowing the GiChD to identify changes in techniques, equipment or safety issues. A sub-set of this database could focus on accidents in a region to see if any specific problems occur. On a broader level, the setup of the Croatian Mine Action Centre (CROMACS) scientific council will help to tap into the local scientific community is quite unique in the world, and possibilities exist to expand this concept to other regions.

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Guest Editorial

by Ian Mansfield, Operations Director, GIChD

Little Hand

That little hand, that busy hand,
That played in sand and tossed a stone,
That slept beside your weary head,
That grasped your father’s hand so tight,
As you walked through the loud bazaar,
And touched everything as it came its way.

On little hands on busy hand,
Do not be afraid that toy,
That looks so strange, just lying there,
We're only boring reddened stones,
Are found among the blasted nuts.

On little fingers, busy fingers,
Find other things to touch today,
Remember what your father said
About those curious, metal things
That you so want to show your friends.

Little Hand

Oh little hand, small brown hand!
That touched your mother’s gentle face,
Reach up to climb another rock,
Leave curious things where they lie,
And wonder not at strange delights!

On little hand, where are you now?
A dried, brown sandbag took your place,
Where have you and what do you do?
No, no my son, it won’t come back
That curious thing took it away.

On little son, my little boy,
We loved that little hand too much
And all the games it used to play
But I have you and you have me
At least for one more hungry day.

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