August 2002

The Mine Action Information Center and The State Department’s Humanitarian Demining Fellowship: Molding the Future of the Landmine Community

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James Madison University (JMU) is host to the State Department’s Mine Action Information Center (MAIC). The MAIC has given many students the opportunity, whether through local employment or the State Department’s Humanitarian Demining Fellowship, to learn and experience mine action. Today, many of JMU’s former students are players in the global landmine community.

by David Hartley, MAIC

Kurt Chesko recognized that employment in the mine action community would be an opportunity in a global, multi-faceted humanitarian industry. He knew that working in the landmine community would provide valuable socio-political experience that could be applied to many non-landmine related jobs. Kurt did not anticipate, however, that his fellowship with the U.S. State Department would eventually lead him to war-torn Afghanistan as a deminer.

Kurt, 23, holds a degree in both International Affairs and French from James Madison University (JMU). Before graduating in December of 2000, he applied for the State Department’s Phaneuf-Kneuss-Drew Humanitarian Demining Fellowship program through JMU’s MAIC. In January 2001, the State Department assigned Chesko to work in New York on a multi-media CD-ROM entitled “Landmines: Clearing the Way.”

The CD-ROM highlighted all aspects of mine action and mine awareness and was produced by Huntington Associates with funds from the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Defense and the Rockefeller Foundation.

As a State Department Fellow, Kurt worked as the production assistant on this project. This experience, which included profiling 39 mine-affected countries and collecting first-hand information from deminers throughout the world, gave him a thorough and comprehensive understanding of mine action. He used this experience to gain a position at HALO USA, the American arm of the British charity HALO Trust. His primary tasks are to raise the organization’s profile and investigate new sources of funding.

Chesko’s job as Program Coordinator of HALO USA ultimately afforded him the opportunity to remove landmines in Afghanistan. All of HALO Trust’s employees are given the chance to do field work, and he took full advantage. Taking a UN flight into Kabul, Kurt spent about a month training and demining, as well as experiencing the full spectrum of Afghanistan’s devastation. The work deeply affected him, and in the future he plans on pursuing a permanent field position with HALO Trust.

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NOTE FROM THE FIELD

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Africo: It's Big!

d by Dennis Barlow, Director, MAIC

The great opera commentator, John Cusack was once asked to describe the monumental Wagnerian "Ring Cycle" using only one word. After pondering the question for a moment he responded by characterizing it as, "long." At first, this obvious answer seemed more flippant than serious, but a little thought leads one to conclude that Cusack was on to something. Many words could describe the Ring: monumental, bombastic, fantastic, convoluted, stirring, mythological, but each limits the scope or makes a judgment which may not be ultimately true. The truth is that someone who wants to tackle the Ring must be prepared to undergo quite a long journey—an investment in both time and emotion—to discover the many treasures, which may reward the patient and skilled listener.

The Challenge of African "Bigness"

The challenge, as Africa itself, may be described as simply "Big." We might be daunted by the fact that the landmine threat there could be described as complex, multi-dimensional, problematic, or difficult. On the other hand, we might be tempted to set the promise of a dream fullfilled and describe the situation as "harmonious," "hopeful," "coordinated," "focused," or "promising." But we would be well cautioned to approach the challenge of landmine remediation in Africa, much as the Wagners do with patience and diligence—and the clear recognition that the landmine problem in Africa is a multifaceted puzzle which can, with only the most energetic and dedicated of outlooks, yield dramatic and inspiring results.

So in dealing with Africa, let us first accept that it is big and diverse. There are long distances to and from landmine-affected areas; there are vast and dramatic topographical environments ranging from desert to tropical forest, from lush and verdant fields to barren alkali plains. The threatened people live in small villages in tribes, and are nomadic or sedentary, often displaced or in refugee status. Almost every conceivable kind of landmine has been planted in Africa in the past sixty years. African countries represent varying kinds of political outlooks and cultural dynamics, which are as home to peoples of different races and dialects and different cultures, and often conflicting, philosophies, tribal outlooks, and religions. The size and scope of the space and the people that are Africa do not lend themselves to a "one-size-fits-all" landmine remediation scheme. Therefore, several approaches are suggested to maximize the chances for success in planning and conducting mine action campaigns in Africa.

Synchronize Your Watches—and Your Plans

The first observation is that since Africa is too big and too diverse to treat uniformly, no one organization or mine action methodology will work everywhere. The key to comprehending Africa is the synchronization of complementary efforts made possible by the best possible integration, cooperation, and communication of involved organizations. This recognition and its implied interaction with the different groups' activities extend beyond mine action to other families of humanitarian action.

Very often mine action projects can be accomplished best in conjunction with activities such as civic action projects, feeding programs, public health missions, agriculture and land rehabilitation, or post-conflict support. Any organization hoping to maximize or insure the lasting effects of its mine action mission would be well advised to link in activities to other relief or humanitarian efforts.

Light One Candle

A second consideration is to attempt to win small and achievable victories. I am reminded of the profound slogan, which advises us to "Think globally, act locally." Any one organization's attempt to try to unravel the tapestry of Africa must be prepared to "throw the Ring" and, let us all hope, create another opera capable of setting us thinking and feeling about this vast world. In the same way, it is unrealistic to think that one organization can do all the work; each activity must be supported: funding, technical support, and political support. The project should have as its goal an end state, which is discernible (even if subjectively), meaningful to the community, and which will be part of an even greater national tapestry.

This kind of approach is what non-governmental organizations (NGO) have done so remarkably well in the area of mine action over the last ten years; they have thus served as an example, an inspiration, and an example to people of many countries who are working to solve Africa's landmine problems which will be as frustrating as it is unavoidable, and which has every likelihood of becoming counterproductive. The stick is to find an end state, which is feasible, motivates the people, is supportive, focusing on realistic tasks, and politically expedient. The project should have as its goal an end state, which is discernible (even if subjectively), meaningful to the community, and which will be part of an even greater national tapestry.

Published by JMU Scholarly Commons, 2002

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