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Africa: It's Big!

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fessional services firm that specializes in humanitarian assistance, project services, arms control, and private sector development. In the last 21 years, RONCO has supplied varying levels of in-country management and support to 300 demining projects in more than 50 developing countries. As a Program Associate, Stacy’s job is to “provide support to these country programs from the home office” and to “impart reports about the effect of RONCO’s operations on local populations.”

She also edits and compiles monthly field reports from various country programs and updates content on RONCO’s website. Stacy’s contribution from Editorial Assistant to Program Associate was “a natural evolution of sorts.” Like many of the MAC’s student employees, Stacy applied for and received the State Department’s Humanitarian Demining fellowship. RONCO, a State Department contractor for worldwide demining efforts, subsequently offered Smith a job. The “basic understanding of mine action” she received at the MAC, along with her research experience and her interest in human rights, prepared Smith well for a job at RONCO. Moreover, “the fast-paced environment of the State Department” forced Stacy to “work efficiently, yet accurately, to complete projects and assignments.”

The Frausto-Kreuzel-Drew Humanitarian Demining Fellowship immediately challenged Stacy, and “turned out to be a great experience, so that prepared [her] for this job.” During the first few months of the Fellowship, Smith drafted articles for the State Department’s annual publication, To Walk the Earth in Safety. She also traveled to Southeast Asia to visit clearance sites in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. Smith described the two-week journey as “an incredible experience that [increased] her knowledge of landmines, demining activities and the U.S. commitment to mine-affected countries.” Much of Stacy’s success in her present position can be attributed to her knowledge of mine action and the U.S. commitment to mine-affected countries.

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 use the promise of a dream fulfilled and describe the situation as hopeful, coordinated, focused, or promising. But we would be well cautioned to approach the challenge of landmine remediation in Africa, much as the Wagnieres do with patience and diligence—and the clear realization that the landmine problem in Africa is a multifaceted puzzle which can, only with 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 alkaline plains. Threatened people live in diverse communities, in tribes, and are nomadic or sedentary, often displaced or in refugee status. Almost everyone conceivable kind of landmine has been planted in Africa over the past sixty years. African countries represent varying kinds of political outlooks and socioeconomic properties; just as they are home to peoples of different races and different languages and often conflicting, philosophies, tribal outlooks, and religions. The size and scope of the space and the people that Africans are not used to themselves to a “one-size-fits-all” landmine remediation scheme. Therefore, several approaches are necessary 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 comprehensive mine action 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 between 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 reclamation, 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 unilaterally take the lead in trying to solve Africa’s landmine problems will be as frustrating as it is unsolvable, and has every likelihood of becoming counterproductive. The trick is to find analogues which are feasible, labeled, and supportive, focusing on realistic tasks, and politically expedient. The project should have as its goal an end state, which is reachable (even if not immediately) and meaningful to the community, and which will be part of an even greater national initiative.

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 merely try to “do good” and develop a program around that simple concept. If kept in perspective, and with resources and support, the hundreds of NGOs at work on landmine remediation in Africa can steadily and relentlessly achieve cumulative effects that can demonstrably advance the pan-African solution to the landmine threat.
Consider Every Available Tool

The third suggestion is to use every advantage, every tool, which can help each organization maximize its efficiencies and effectiveness. Wanting to do the right thing is indeed the key motivator, but in itself does not ensure efficient or successful accomplishment of the project. Twenty years ago a well-meaning NGO would go to Africa and pretty much had to rely on applying the resources donated by a certain church or donor. Today most organizations involved in mine action (or humanitarian demining) can multiply their outreach by utilizing "smart" support services and products being developed and offered by various organizations globally—often free of charge.

The list of tools available to most mine action practitioners in the past three years alone is quite considerable. It is literally impossible to mention here all the help available to organizations involved in mine action, but a short list would include the following services. Up to date country information is provided in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) fact book. Geographical support is rendered by the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining and the Mine Action Information Center (MAIC) at James Madison University. Information support has been spearheaded by the Information Mine Action System (IMAS), developed by the GICHD. Mine action management courses are available at Cranfield University. International mine action standards, developed under the auspices of the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), the GICHD, and the MAIC are posted on the UNMAS E-Mine web page. Training support is available from a number of countries such as Denmark and France. Reporting mechanisms and forms have been designed and offered by Handicap International. Survey (impact) reports are available from the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. Landmine identification CDs are available from the U.S. government. Information on access to these and many other valuable services and products are regularly posted on such helpful and user friendly websites as the UNMAS E-Mine, the JMU MAIC, and the GICHD web sites.

In spite of the daunting nature of the landmine threat in Africa, mine action groups can do three things to prepare them to help tame the beast. One is to provide their organizations with the best mine action tools and services available; today that includes a panoply of information, systems, computer aids, and training to help plan, conduct a well-coordinated and thought out campaign. The second is to plan an operation small enough to control and to ensure local success, but still tied to a goal which can be measured and aggregated to the effort in the whole country or region. Thirdly, multiply the effectiveness of the project and ensure its sustainability by integrating it with capacity building techniques and other humanitarian activities underway or planned in the area.

Soldiers are fond of talking about additional efforts, which increase the effectiveness of an operation; they call such complementary efforts, "force multipliers." While landmines are not the most dangerous threat facing Africa, the mine action approach to solving that problem may bring needed cooperation, application, and focus to the overall thrust of relief and humanitarian operations there and thus become a major "development multiplier" and make Africa a little less "big." ■

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Landmine News Around the World

POSTCARDS WRITTEN FOR PEACE

Part of the festivities surrounding the 2002 World Cup soccer tournament, which took place in both Korea and Japan, the Korea and Japan Campaigns to Ban Landmines (KCBL and JCBL) created a program entitled "A Goal for All." KCBL and JCBL asked citizens to submit a message or illustration of peace to those affected by landmines on a postcard, in an effort to illustrate the severe consequences of these mines. The organizations hope to use the diverse audience of the World Cup to draw attention to landmine issues, specifically to the universal ban of landmines. All collected postcards were displayed in June 2002 at Yokohama Arena in Tokyo, Japan, where the final game of the tournament was held.

ILLEGAL LANDMINE TRANSACTION UNCOVERED

Landmine Action, the United Kingdom's chapter of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), recently uncovered an illegal attempt by a local company to sell AP mines. PW Defence Limited, an arms company located in Derbyshire, was attempting to sell landmines at arms fairs in Greece, South Africa and London. Also, the BritishBroadcasting Company (BBC) reports that in April 2002, it tape-recorded a senior representative from PW Defence Limited offering 500 landmines to a journalist in London. After the government signed the Mine Ban Treaty in December 1997 and created the Landmines Act of 1998, trading landmines become illegal throughout the United Kingdom and punishable by up to 14 years in prison.

BEES USED TO LOCATE LANDMINES

Funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's (DARPA) Controlled Biological Systems Program, chemists from the Department of Energy's Sandia National Laboratories (DOE/SNL) and entomologists from the University of Montana (UM) recently began a study to determine if foraging bees could detect landmines. Scientists hope that the bees can be trained to find TNT and bring the proof back on their sturdily charged bodies. To accomplish this goal, UM scientists must decipher which molecules the bees can actually smell and then train them to find these chemicals. Researchers are also studying the way that plants might absorb TNT particles into their roots, consequently affecting other parts, specifically their pollen. The ultimate goal of the project is to establish bee hives near suspected minefields, monitoring flight activity and analyzing hive samples in order to distinguish contaminated areas from safe areas.

INDIA AND PAKISTAN LAY LANDMINES ALONG COMMON BORDER

The Pakistani attack on the Indian parliament on December 13, 2001, began intense fraudding between the two nations and consequently, the laying of the largest number of anti-personnel and anti-vehicle landmines since the originisation of the Mine Ban Treaty in 1997. India began laying landmines along the border on December 25, 2001, and Pakistan admits to doing so. In fact, some reports state that India plans to cover its entire 1,800-mile border with mines; this would create some three-mile-wide minefields. Media reports state that Pakistan has also laid numerous landmines. A letter from the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington, D.C. to the ICBL says, "Pakistan has been obliged to take precautionary defense measures." The government, however, has not verified this information. Regardless, civilians are being injured and killed on both sides, although with more frequency in India.

KENYAN HERDERS FILE LAWSUIT AGAINST UNITED KINGDOM

Members of the Masai and Samburu ethnic groups in Kenya have filed a lawsuit against the British Army seeking compensation for damages caused by the UXO that the British allegedly abandoned. Not only do they want compensation for the victims and their families, they also want the British Army to stop its training efforts in Kenya. The plaintiff's British lawyer recently began to gather data in support of the herders' case, which has proven to be a difficult task. While he has the death certificates of numerous children who have been killed by UXO, the cause of death simply states bomb explosion with no further details documented. Kenya Attorney General Amos Wako has been quoted as saying that military agreements between the United Kingdom and Kenya are classified and will only be publicized "when necessary." Most recently in July 2002, the British government agreed to pay the Kenyans $7 million (U.S.) in compensation on a "limited liability basis." ■

HALO TRUST CLEARS 1,000,000 LANDMINES AND UXO

On June 19, 2002, HALO Trust announced that it had cleared 1,000,000 landmines and UXO. Receiving funding from the U.S. government, United Nations, European Commission, other governments and numerous individual donors, HALO Trust is the largest non-profit mine-clearing organization, employing over 4,500 people.

Scientists are studying how bees might assist in detecting landmines planted in fields through their ability to transport scents collected on their furry bodies while gathering pollen.