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The Role of the Military in Mine Action

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**The Role of the Military in Mine Action**

**Introduction**

This article is drawn from a study conducted by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) entitled, *A Study of the Role of the Military in Mine Action*, published in September 2003. The study was commissioned by the United Nations, and sought to address issues such as the suitability, appropriateness, and capability of the military to undertake mine action. The findings show that while military action in mine action is not always appropriate, militaries can play a positive role.

**Select Findings from the GICHD Study**

**The Use of the Military in Mine Action**

Military forces may be composed of military units and individuals deployed under a UN or other peacekeeping mission, on a humanitarian-specific assignment or under some other arrangement. Visiting military forces may include individual instructors or Technical Advisers (TAs) assisting in UN-sponsored mine action programmes, instructor teams under bilateral “train the trainer” programmes or specialists in support of specific parts of national programmes, such as teams establishing mine detection dog (MDD) projects, mine risk education (MRE) projects, or information management systems. Assistance may also include the provision of equipment, but experience has shown that heavy military mine action equipment (usually based on a battle tank) is not suitable for humanitarian demining.

**The Use of Local Militaries**

Local armed forces begin with some advantages in mine clearance. They typically have experience with landmines and other UXO, their salaries are already paid, they possess a logistics-system, including communication and medical back-up, and are organized to operate as a team. Local military forces may have the necessary equipment for demining, but if not, this can be provided by visiting forces bilaterally or multilaterally.

**Clearing mines for humanitarian purposes demands specific expertise, which may not necessarily be gained as a result of ordinary military training or experience.** Also, moral ambiguities surrounding their involvement as local military forces may be less pronounced on salary and conditions, and conscripts do not make the best deminers. It should not be forgotten that military deminers are first and foremost soldiers and as such will be used as combat engineers if hostilities re-emerge. In the aftermath of an internal armed conflict, the national army may not be perceived as neutral and may not be welcomed by affected communities. In these situations, it is better not to use the military or assign them tasks that do not bring them into contact with a community, such as the clearance of military barracks or airfields.

Visiting Military Forces

Many armed forces possess considerable expertise in mine action, including strategizing and overseeing demining and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) programmes, especially in emergency situations. The positive elements they bring may include experience, knowledge of techniques and advanced EOD skills, and in a number of cases, a knowledge of the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). A number of the case studies in the GICHD report, notably Bosnia-Herzegovina and Nicaragua, show that demining accidents have been reduced due to training and oversight from visiting military forces.

However, in mine-affected countries where there is both local military and civilian involvement in the mine action process, visiting military forces tend to view their mission as fulfilling a rather narrow role. Cooperation and coordination with civilian structures are not always accorded adequate priority, which can lead to compartmentalization of the assets being delivered. Certain missions may even be undertaken without any direct knowledge of the civilian organizations operating in the same theatre.

Bilateral arrangements between militaries can be appropriate when the local military is largely or entirely in charge of a country’s mine action programme. Such arrangements, however, may not provide an adequate planning and programming framework when there are multiple local and international actors involved, as programming complexity increases geometrically as the number of actors increases. As an example, it is possible that a National Mine Action Authority (NMMA) or a UN Mine Action Centre (MAC) may be working in conformity with locally adapted standards, but a visiting military force may be training on a different interpretation. The IMAS represent an international set of standards that may be adapted and interpreted differently by each host country, making it unclear whether local and international authorities are operating in exactly the same way.
Thus, although UN peacekeepers have been present in Lebanon for more than two decades, they have typically conducted only mine clearance to support their own operations, and according to their own national military procedures. Though this may be consistent with the obligations of parties to a conflict under international law, it is often not the best way to manage the problem in humanitarian terms. In fact, throughout the more than 20-year experience of Lebanon of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), it has been challenging to mobilize the necessary personnel from visiting military forces. This problem is compounded by the fact that the costs of the military personnel involved are not covered by the UNIFIL's peacekeeping mission. The costs of military personnel often exceed those of civilian mine clearance teams. This is not only because the military personnel are better equipped and better trained, but also because they are often required to work in more difficult and dangerous conditions.

Use of Military TAs

Visiting military forces have often assigned military personnel to serve as TAs to the various NGOs and project implementation units. Many of these have performed admirably, and the secondment of active military personnel appears to be a successful strategy for building up and running an emergency phase and in highly specialized roles, such as EOD.

However, the GICHID study has concluded that the overall contribution of these personnel has been lower than expected. The use of military personnel in humanitarian missions is often hampered by the fact that they are not prepared to work in a team and are not trained to work in a humanitarian context. Additionally, military personnel are often not familiar with the local context and the specific needs of the affected population. This can lead to a lack of coordination and an inefficient use of resources.

Enhancing Combat Capacity

The provision of assistance to local military forces for mine action purposes, in the form of training and equipment, has sometimes been controversial as it can also enhance combat capacity. The provision of military assistance must therefore be carefully considered, taking into account the potential ramifications of supplying training or equipment to a military force. The current political climate in the region can make it difficult to achieve a balance between providing support to the local military and preventing the enhancement of their war-fighting capabilities.

CONCLUSION

The GICHID study on the role of the mine in action mine action found that the military has played a significant role in a number of national mine action programmes. This can be either through involvement in the local military forces or with support from a visiting military force. Inevitably, at the end of a conflict, local militaries will need training and equipment to enable them to undertake humanitarian demining tasks against international standards. The decision to provide such support will need to be carefully weighed against the risk of enhancing war-fighting capabilities, and what phase of the post-conflict period it is. However, the study was able to determine that if it were to be started at the beginning of a conflict, it could enhance the training of the national militaries.

The role of the military in mine action programmes is complex and requires careful consideration. While military personnel can be a valuable asset in humanitarian mine action, it is crucial to ensure that their presence does not exacerbate the conflict and that they are not used in a way that undermines the achievement of humanitarian goals.

ENDNOTES

1. See www.gichd.ch.

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of epidemiology and public health methods of assessment to analyze and present data used for planning and monitoring. Additionally, the HDTC hosts representatives from the Psychological Operations unit to discuss specific requirements and needs for the mine action programmes. The course development process allowed the center to update and improve training programmes for subsequent classes.

New Plans for Training

The HDTC is planning to add two additional training modules to its curriculum. The first is a Level 1 UXO Clearance course that will enhance training of technicians to perform basic area clearance (BAC) in contaminated areas. Students attending this course will graduate with specialized knowledge gained from hands-on training and mission-specific lesson material in-hand for use in teaching students in the mine clearance sector.

The second new training module pertains to an information management course that is under development. The course will provide a foundation in areas such as information management, data collection, and analysis, as well as an introduction to the principles of information management in humanitarian mine action.

The HDTC is committed to providing high-quality training to prepare students for successful careers in the mine action field.
Thus, although UN peacekeepers have been present in Lebanon for more than two decades, they have typically conducted only mine clearance to support their own operations, and according to their own national military procedures. Though this may be consistent with the obligations of parties to a conflict under international law to be responsible for mines, booby-traps, and other explosive devices laid by those parties, it does not necessarily lead to substantial remediation of the problem in humanitarian terms. In fact, throughout the more than 20-year experience in Lebanon of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), as seemingly simple a task as the hand-over of records concerning the mines clearance work between incoming and outgoing contingents, appears not to have been accomplished.

**Use of Military TAs**

Visiting military forces have often assigned military personnel to serve as TAs to the various MAGs and project implementation units. Many of these have performed admirably, and the secondment of active military personnel appears to have been a successful strategy for providing a pick-up and running to an emergency phase and in highly specialized roles, such as EOD. However, the GICHD study has concluded that the overall contribution of these secondment programmes has proven modest in the long term. There have also been criticisms of the role played by some TAs, on the basis of unclear chains of command and reporting lines and confused terms of reference. It has also been claimed that coordinating authorities have sometimes failed to exploit fully their skills and potential contributions to the programme. Thus, a number of the case studies in the GICHD report, while acknowledging an important role for in-kind military advisers at the outset of a mine action programme, express concern about their contribution over the long term in a development context. This is the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cambodia in particular, where TAs may not necessarily have been equipped with the skills needed to sustain mine action. Nor are TAs necessarily experienced in building local capacities through advising their local counterparts.

In 1999, in Cambodia, for instance, the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) hosted 76 TAs, both military and civilian. A review by UN Development Program (UNDP) concluded that, "while the military has made an impressive contribution in developing capacity within the CMAC, particularly technical capacity, in general military advisers are less suited to meet the training needs and capacity demands CMAC now face." Indeed, TAs may end up learning more about mine action than do their national counterparts. These difficulties are compounded by tours of duty—typically six months—that are often too short for the individuals to make an effective contribution to the programme.

**Enhancing Combat Capacity**

The provision of assistance to local military forces for mine action purposes, in the form of training and/or equipment, has sometimes been controversial as these can also enhance combat capacity. The tradition providing military assistance must carefully consider the potential implications of supplying training or equipment to a military force. The historical evolution of the conflict, the current peace and reconciliation developments as well as the nature of the military measure and deployment structure will all be weighed against the potential benefits of military support for mine action prior to the provision of assistance. There is no real mechanism to decide this, as most military-to-military assistance is provided on a bilateral basis.

**CONCLUSION**

The GICHD study on the role of the military in mine action found that the military has played a significant role in a number of national mine action programmes. This is evident through involvement by the armed forces or with support from a visiting military force. Inevitably, at the end of a conflict, local militaries will need training and equipment to enable them to undertake humanitarian demining tasks according to international standards. The decision to provide such support will need to be carefully weighed against the risk of enhancing their war-fighting capabilities, and what role the post-conflict period is. The study was unable to determine if it was cheaper to use the military for demining tasks, as productivity and cost-effectiveness are areas that require further study in the whole mine action sector. The use of visiting military forces on the other hand, has been found to be most effective in the emergency or start-up phase of a national mine action programme.

Where there is a mine or UXO problem, humanitarian and development initiatives necessarily involve a high degree of contact and interaction among military personnel, non-military mine action personnel and local communities. Military capabilities, if properly directed and controlled, can bring important skills and organizational assets to complement many mine action activities, particularly in the emergency or start-up phase of a programme. Military organizations are normally trained to deal with sensitive missions, and complete these missions as quickly and efficiently as possible. This works well for almost all mine action issues, and indeed for many military problems like infrastructure repair, but establishing national mine action programmes under post-conflict conditions normally requires a longer-term approach than a military "casual measure." Military actors are unlikely to have the best idea how mine clearance fits into the larger mine action picture.

The composter activities of mine action have to be closely coordinated if they are to work at all and military staff are well-versed in the concept of how many incompatible components work in a plan. Mine action plans require a similar degree of integration, but this planning has to take place with a number of different agencies, both military and non-military, which often have different perspectives and agendas. All the actors must be prepared to submit in overall coordination and direction. This does not mean interfering in the established military "chain of command," but that the broader issues like national strategies and priority setting for all the aspects of mine action are already used a version of IMSMA that incorporates digitized maps of the local training area as Fort Leonard Wood. This allows students to work, with aerial survey data collected from simulated hazard areas and incorporate them into IMSMA.