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Do No Harm: The Challenge of Protecting Civilians from the IED Threat in South-central Somalia

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FEATURE

DO NO HARM: THE CHALLENGE OF PROTECTING CIVILIANS FROM THE IED THREAT IN SOUTH-CENTRAL SOMALIA

By Abigail Jones [Danish Refugee Council / Danish Demining Group]

In many countries, improvised explosive devices (IED), including improvised landmines, now constitute more of a threat to civilians than factory-manufactured landmines and other conventional weapons. The *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor* 2016 reported that the total number of casualties from victim-operated IEDs, which act in a similar manner to anti-personnel mines, increased from 1,075 in 2014 to 1,331 in 2015, the highest annual total of IED casualties recorded since 1999.¹ In response to this, humanitarian mine action organizations are expanding their scope of activities to include IED awareness for civilians either as a stand-alone activity or by integrating messages on IEDs into traditional mine risk education (MRE) sessions. This article explores the protection concerns related to the conduct of any educational activities on IEDs, with a particular focus on south-central Somalia. The article also discusses the challenges that exist for humanitarian organizations to successfully plan and implement IED awareness while upholding the principle of “do no harm.” Furthermore, the article argues that there is a need to recognize that educational activities related to IEDs must be approached with methodologies, messages, and materials specific to these devices, as opposed to simply copying those that are considered to be effective for MRE.

Importance of Risk Assessments

As is the case with MRE, IED awareness should aim to reduce civilian casualties. However, a thorough risk assessment is the first step in identifying the realistic benefits of IED awareness and ensuring that they significantly outweigh the potential associated risks. This is due to the fact that IED awareness has the potential to create serious protection issues for the civilian population, many of which are outlined in the rest of the article. There is also a risk that organizations will be seen as taking sides in the conflict. Therefore, a thorough risk assessment is a key decision-making tool to help organizations understand the status of the device, the typical target,

the common scenarios of use, and the implications of implementing IED awareness for both the civilian population and the organization itself.² However, the risk assessment should also present concrete risk-mitigation strategies. Moreover, due to the complexities created by dynamic conflicts, risk assessments need to be made at regional or local levels in order to be relevant. The Danish Refugee Council/Danish Demining Group (DRC/DDG) has designed such a risk assessment process that is proposed as a framework for the drafting of a Technical Note on Mine Action in support of references to IEDs within International Mine Action Standards (IMAS).

Analysis of the Situation in South-Central Somalia

In south-central Somalia, IEDs are actively being deployed by armed opposition groups, such as Harakaat al-Shabaab al-Mujaahidiin, as well as by criminal gangs and during inter-militant conflict.³ These weapons bring the time, place, and method of attack fully under the operator’s control, hence the high prevalence of use. There are very few cases of legacy devices because unused devices that did not detonate are typically retrieved and employed elsewhere.⁴ Humanitarian organizations looking into the feasibility of conducting IED awareness in south-central Somalia should be cognizant of the fact that, in this context, IEDs are not the after-effects of conflict but a tool actively used by armed opposition groups to destabilize and attack the state.⁵ Any organization getting involved in this issue, regardless of altruistic intentions, risks being perceived as siding with one party to the conflict over the other, and could therefore become a target for al-Shabaab or other IED users.

Data available from January to July 2016 demonstrates that 40 percent of IED attacks in south-central Somalia during this period involved command-detonated IEDs, four percent were victim-operated IEDs (VOIED), and 56 percent were unknown. The high percentage of devices listed as unknown is due to the challenges posed to carrying out post-blast forensic

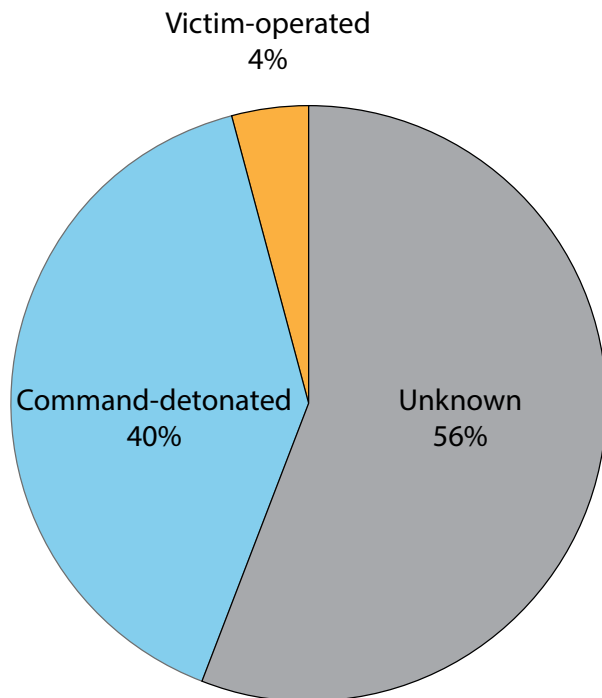


Figure 1. 2016 IED snapshot: South-central Somalia.
Figure courtesy of the author.

investigations at the explosion sites, and it also highlights the difficulty of compiling accurate data on types of IEDs used. It should be noted that Somalia is following the IEDs evolution trend, as was seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, with predictable increases in device complexity and explosive charge size.⁶ However, Somalia is distinct from other countries due to the fact that a significant proportion of IEDs encountered in those countries are VOIEDs.

Overwhelmingly, IED attacks in south-central Somalia target government agencies and representatives such as security personnel or government officials. The majority of IED attacks target locations where government or security service personnel work, such as the July 2016 attack on the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) building in Mogadishu, and the two attacks on the SYL Hotel in Mogadishu where the government often hosts major conferences.⁷ Incidents involving high-profile targets are typically complex attacks where vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIED) or suicide VBIEDs (SVBIED) are used to initiate the attack, which is immediately followed by gunmen who wear suicide vests, also known as person-borne IEDs (PBIED). Complex attacks are also a tactic to intimidate the local population by showing that al-Shabaab can strike wherever and whenever they like, including in areas that are officially under the control of the Federal Government of Somalia. In addition, roadside IEDs are used to target military and police convoys, such as when a remote-controlled

IED (RCIED) exploded as a police vehicle passed it near the Black Sea neighborhood in Mogadishu on 11 November 2016.⁸

Armed opposition groups (AOG) commonly use IEDs to target representatives of the international community, particularly the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the United Nations, and other representatives of the diplomatic community. In these cases, they are targeted because they are perceived as supporting the Federal Government of Somalia and therefore are not considered to have a neutral or impartial status, or—in the case of AMISOM—because they actively engaged in combat against al-Shabaab. A recent example is an attack that targeted AMISON troops in El-Ade in January 2016. The incident began with the detonation of a VBIED followed by al-Shabaab fighters storming the base.⁹ Additionally, twin VBIED attacks were carried out near the airport in Mogadishu in July 2016 and reportedly killed ten people; the attack was claimed by the spokesperson of al-Shabaab to have targeted the headquarters of the African Union force.¹⁰

In 2015, there were 887 IED casualties in south-central Somalia, 454 (51 percent) of which were civilians.¹¹ Research indicates that in the majority of cases, civilian casualties are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, caught in the



The Ambassador Hotel.
All photos courtesy of UNMAS Somalia.

initial blast or during the subsequent armed attack, such as when a roadside IED near Lafole town killed 18 civilians traveling in a mini-bus that was escorted by a vehicle carrying government troops.¹² In addition, there are increasing examples of deliberate attacks on public places that are considered too western and liberal, such as the three attacks on restaurants at Lido Beach in Mogadishu in 2016.

Gathering Information for IED Awareness

With civilians in south-central Somalia representing 51 percent of the casualties from IEDs in 2015, the protection implications of this are significant in Somalia. There is certainly a strong argument for further research into what could be done to provide civilians with the knowledge and skills to avoid being caught up in an IED attack. While many recognize that designing and implementing an effective educational program requires a thorough needs assessment to make informed programming decisions, this is problematic in the case of IED awareness.¹³ There are many risks associated with data-gathering on an active IED threat that do not apply to factory-manufactured mines or explosive remnants of war (ERW). This raises important questions from a protection perspective.

In the context of south-central Somalia, information gathering on vulnerabilities at the community level to an active IED threat is extremely sensitive and likely to be perceived by the local population as intelligence gathering on behalf of government or security forces. The perception that humanitarian organizations are affiliated with the government would call into question the neutrality and impartiality of the humanitarian organization involved and could result in the organization and its staff being considered as legitimate targets for attack by AOGs. Humanitarian organizations should also be sensitive to the fact that, at this point, the IED threat in south-central Somalia is dealt with almost exclusively by state entities, which include the police, military, and intelligence services. Consequently, despite altruistic and protective intentions, efforts by international organizations to gather information on these issues are likely to be treated with suspicion and even hostility by state actors.¹⁴ At the community level, anyone who is known or suspected to have provided information as part of such an assessment could be viewed as an informant. Considering that IED facilitators, as well as silent supporters of al-Shabaab live within the communities, there is a very real threat of retribution at the community level.¹⁵

This analysis raises questions on whether it is possible to carry out information gathering on IEDs in south-central Somalia while upholding the principle of “do no harm.” In



The Nasa Hablood Hotel.

this context, DRC/DDG believes that employing participatory approaches to needs assessments—for example carrying out key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and individual interviews with members of affected communities—has the potential to do great harm not only to the humanitarian organization but also to the beneficiary community. Hence, developing new methodologies and tools for analyzing the vulnerabilities of the civilian population to IEDs is prudent, and mine action organizations should avoid relying on those that have been used for traditional MRE needs assessments.

Implementing the IED Risk Education Awareness Campaign

If moving forward with an IED awareness campaign, organizations would do well to approach south-central Somalia's situation with methodologies, messages, and materials that are specific to IEDs as opposed to those that are effective for traditional MRE.¹⁶ First and foremost, pictures of IEDs serve little purpose due to the fact that the manner in which IEDs are deployed implies that they remain hidden or disguised. If information regarding the appearance of IEDs or the context

where they are placed is disseminated in communities, the groups that fabricate these weapons will potentially react by changing the devices' appearance, components, and locations. Another risk involved in using pictures of IEDs is that everything could potentially look like an IED. This would inevitably contribute to an unnecessary fear of everyday objects among the civilian population and intensify the psychological suffering already experienced by the Somali population.

Similarly, while significant work was done to develop IED awareness curricula for military personnel deployed in conflict-affected environments, this information may not be appropriate for civilian audiences. For military personnel, IED awareness may delve into detail of how an IED is constructed and deployed, which is intended to supplement what they know about tactics, techniques, and procedures. This is reminiscent of the early days of mine action, when beneficiaries were provided with irrelevant information, e.g., the name of the weapon, the amount of explosive inside, and the functioning principle by which the mine operated. In the case of landmines and ERW, these unnecessary details were eventually deemed inappropriate and discarded. However, at this stage, the humanitarian community presently runs the risk of repeating the same mistakes in addressing IED-related threats.

Humanitarian organizations who share this level of detail with civilian audiences in south-central Somalia may inadvertently encourage people to approach suspected IEDs or, worse still, try to move them to protect others.¹⁷ Moreover, experience from counter-IED efforts illustrate that IED users regularly adapt their emplacement or targeting methods to thwart counter-IED measures.¹⁸ The implication of this for IED awareness is that materials and messages could quickly become irrelevant as the nature of IEDs evolve. Finally, if humanitarian organizations are seen disseminating information on how to make IEDs and how they work at the community-level, serious questions may be asked by the host government as to the purpose of educating people on this.

All educational activities on IEDs for civilians in south-central Somalia should therefore focus on what the civilian population needs to know, which is distinctly different from that of military personnel. IED awareness at the community-level must emphasize improving situational awareness and the ability to recognize the IED indicators as well as those of an imminent attack. Depending on the results of the risk assessment, sessions could elaborate on the typical scenarios in which civilians become casualties and on what to do if

civilians come across a suspected IED, are in the proximity of an explosion, or are caught in gunfire following an explosion. Asking the civilian population to "report" IEDs in a context like south-central Somalia is inappropriate.

Looking Toward the Future

This article (1) explores the concerns relating to any educational activities on IEDs for the civilian population, with a particular focus on south-central Somalia. This article also discusses (2) the challenges that exist for humanitarian organizations wishing to plan and implement IED awareness successfully whilst upholding the principle of "do no harm." Furthermore, the article argues that (3) there is a need to recognize that civilian-focused educational activities on IEDs must be approached with methodologies, materials, and messages specific to these devices.

The case of south-central Somalia is used to highlight the fact that despite the high number of civilian casualties and the altruistic intentions behind engaging in IED awareness, if appropriate risk-mitigation strategies are not in place, related activities have the potential to do real and long-lasting harm to organizations and beneficiaries. As a result, supplementing the necessary tools and best practices in dealing with IEDs is vital for the safety and effectiveness of mine action work in current conflict environments. A new Technical Note on Mine Action is a sound first step in this direction; however, to ensure that they "do no harm" the issue will require organizations to proceed with caution. ©

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Abigail Jones is the global risk education technical advisor for Danish Refugee Council (DRC). She was seconded from the Gender and Mine Action Programme (GMAP) in early 2015 to start up the KAP survey in Ukraine for Danish Demining Group. Prior to joining DRC, she worked as the program manager for GMAP conducting gender mainstreaming activities globally and MAG (Mines Advisory Group) in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She holds a Master of Science in development studies from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (U.K.).