

A “LAND RELEASE” GICHD MISSION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO


The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): a brief description

A huge country, with poor infrastructure

Nearly five times as large as France, representing roughly the entire surface of Western Europe, counting some 68 million inhabitants, DRC, which was named Zaire from 1971 to 1991, is a major Central African state. Its mining potential is considerable, but often badly exploited, and the produced wealth only benefits a marginal part of the population, 70% of which is living below the poverty level. Infrastructure, especially related to transportation, is barely existent: few usable roads; a few railroads, inherited from the Belgian colonisation, which have remained in their 1960 condition; a few operational airports, but no serious local air company. Moving around in this country therefore means relying on the efficient air system put together by the United Nations (nearly 70 aircraft of all types, provided by a wide variety of contributing countries). French is the official language of the country, which also counts four "bantou" national languages (Swahili, Tchiluba, Lingala, Kikongo). The local gazetteer seems pretty confusing (provinces, districts, territories, collectivities, groups); it is anyway completely ignored by the population.

Several dramatic recent armed conflicts, some of which are still lingering

DRC seems to have been at war forever. The last "official" conflict, called the second Congo War, lasted from 1998 to June 2003; it left more than 4.5 million casualties, as well as several million refugees and displaced people (there is no way to verify precise figures). All DRC neighbouring countries have been involved in conflict on Congolese soil, with improbable and always changing alliances (Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Chad, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, not to mention some 30 armed groups), which explains why many experts have dubbed this conflict "the first worldwide African War". The war has been stabilised for a fair amount of time along a north-west/south-east combat line dividing the country into two parts. It has left behind large amounts of explosive remnants of war (ERW), the precise inventory of which remains to be established, along the country borders and this "demarcation line". Sporadic combat, always very violent and sometimes militarily significant, still happens from time to time in the Kivus (eastern part of the country) due to uncontrolled armed group incursions from neighbouring countries.

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Global security issues in DRC: why the mines and ERW issues are of only relative significance

According to some DRC experts, the most important source for armed insecurity is presently... the DRC security forces! Police and military forces are randomly paid, and consequently live on the theft and arson they commit on the local population. Malnutrition and malaria are endemic. AIDS is ravaging a medically under-informed and under-supported population, which is almost constantly subject to sexual abuse by armed groups (some 400,000 women have been raped during the last ten years). DRC is estimated to count some 1.1 million people sick with AIDS –among them more than 4% of all the women in the country- and some 100,000 deaths are supposed to be due to this illness, which only keeps growing. In this overall context, and after some efficient measures were taken with mine risk education, which achieved a reduction in casualties from mines and other ERW down to less than 100 per year, one has to admit that this specific risk might not be seen as an obvious priority by the National Authorities.

The February 2010 Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) mission in DRC

From 30 January to 14 February, GICHD conducted a land release mission in DRC, on initial request from DCA (Dan Church Aid). The United Nations Coordination Centre (UNMACC DRC) was informed of the request and consequently asked for the mission to include a one day seminar in Kisangani, to the benefit of all the operators represented in the country. Havard Bach, Guy Rhodes and Jean-Luc Delon were the GICHD representatives. It must also be mentioned that, in parallel, Thomas Bollinger (from the Information Management Division of the GICHD) was installing the IMSMA New Generation version in Kinshasa.



Central part of the country: Kalemie and Kabalo: Land Release practical exercises

After a very interesting round-up briefing on the general mine action situation in DRC, provided by the UNMACC, the delegation went to the Katanga Province, where DCA

and MSB (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency) operate. DCA general headquarters in the region stand in Kalemie, along the rims of the Tanganika Lake. It operates three manual demining teams, two mobile EOD teams and six survey and risk education teams, while MSB provides specialised support to DCA through MDD (Mine Detection Dogs - seven dogs) and a mechanical capacity. For five days, GICHD experts operated from Kabalo in the central part of the Province, an area where severe fighting occurred around the year 2000. Building on information collected from local people (villages of Ndea, Kabumba, Mitombo and Kenani) through non-technical survey field exercises, best practices were patiently brought to evidence by the GICHD members, to the benefit of DCA and MSB employees. An old issue of MSB dogs accreditation was also quickly resolved by Havard Bach, with the help of the UNMACC. This work was achieved step by step in close cooperation with DCA and MSB teams, which were consequently precisely retrained. It produced detailed maps of the different locations, and allowed for a basic non-technical and technical survey concept to be put together to the benefit of those two operators.

Northern part of the country: Kisangani: a seminar for all operators acting in the DRC

All the operators acting in the country had been gathered by the UNMACC in Kisangani for a one day seminar: DCA, MSB, HI, MAG, MECHEM, TDI. The work previously achieved with DCA and MSB was used to provide all participants with the conclusions and survey methodology, through presentations jointly done by GICHD and DCA/MSB. A set of draft standardised land release procedures was agreed upon, as well as



a set of draft national standards dealing with the same issue. Due to the very positive welcome given by all the participants to those documents, the UNMACC will with no doubt quickly put them into use. It has to be recognised that there is an urgent and crucial need for such documents in DRC; the local situation regarding mines and ERW is not precisely known and the UNMACC would like to have an acceptable view on the situation before the end of 2011 (that deadline is linked to the DRC obligations towards the Ottawa Convention's article 5). All operators' best efforts should concentrate on this issue for the coming months. On top of that, during the presentations and debates on land release in Kisangani, numerous pieces of advice were given by the GICHD experts on best practices while using dog teams and mechanical means, on the best ways to organise logistical support and on how to deal with specifically prolific local vegetation. Last, but not least, the opportunity was taken to visit a manual demining working site by Handicap

International around the airport, in order to provide numerous clues on how to get a better level of information from the local population.

Some final personal feelings and conclusions

A recurring issue: having only English speaking operators working in francophone countries

Because of the near non-existence of francophone mine action operators of critical size, the organisations operating in DRC are from anglo-saxon origin (Nordic countries and Great-Britain), with the sole exception of HI (whose means are nevertheless limited). Since the francophone MA experts have never been structured, these anglophone operators find it difficult to recruit French speaking experts with an acceptable level of English. In the field, as the local population speaks only (some kind of approximate) French and their local “bantou” languages, the survey teams are logically composed of locally recruited people with very limited English skills. This results in a loss of information between survey teams, who do a great job most of the time, and technical teams, mostly composed of English speaking experts whose role is to act upon information provided by the former.

The difficult relationship between the international coordination body and the national authorities

The DRC government ratified the Ottawa Convention in 2002, and then largely delegated its related MA attributions to the United Nations. A National MA Focal Point (NMAFP) was then instituted through a March 2008 decree and placed under the authority of the Interior Security Minister; although it did not receive any significant means of action, this required a review of the delegation which had been given to the UNMACC. It is not surprising, in this context, that slight differences of appreciation can exist between NMAFP and UNMACC. Good sense nevertheless seems to prevail most of the time. The National Coordinator agrees with the fact that he cannot currently function without the services that the UNMACC provides.

National MA Focal Point: new ambitions?

The situation should evolve in the coming years, because the NMAFP is acting rather wisely (the National Coordinator seems to enjoy real political support) and therefore is getting some promising initial results. For example, the Congolese government has just granted some national funding to MA (roughly 2.5 million dollars). The NMAFP also has a project for putting together national demining teams, consisting of military and police. In the long run it will probably become necessary to review the existing balance of

responsibility between the NMAFP and the UNMACC, which is probably good news for DRC.

