UN Mine Action - Ten Years On

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The landmine issue has received significant worldwide exposure over the past few years, particularly with the success of the Ottawa Treaty, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the ICBL and the work of the late Princess of Wales, Diana. However, 1998 marks the tenth year that the United Nations has been involved with mine action. During this period, I have had the opportunity to be the UN Programme Manager of three major mine action programmes - in Afghanistan, Laos, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In this time of heightened awareness, it is interesting to look back at some of the trends that have developed in what is often (sadly) referred to as the 'demining industry'.

UN military peacekeepers had been involved in clearing mines in the mid-1980's to support their mission (and often to support local populations) in countries such as Lebanon. However, it was not until October 1988 in Afghanistan, that the UN launched an appeal for demining funds and became involved in developing the first indigenous, humanitarian demining programme.

Initially, funding was difficult to obtain, as most donors regarded landmines purely as a military problem. Only Germany, Japan, and the USA provided financial support during the early years.

The original concept was to train about 10,000 of the three million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan in basic mine clearance drills, so that, when they returned home en masse after the Soviet withdrawal, they would be able to demine their own villages. But the refugees did not flood back home and it was quickly realized that mine clearance activities would have to be done on a more controlled and coordinated basis. This led to the establishment, with UN support and funding, of a number of specialist Afghan NGOs who undertook the tasks of mine awareness, surveying and mine clearance. The concept of "village level" demining, while initially appearing to be a cheap and simple solution, has not succeeded fully in any programme.

The early training of deminers was simply a direct transfer of military minefield breaching techniques and equipment. The Afghan training camps were initially staffed by military technical advisors from Western countries, all of whom felt that their own techniques and equipment were the best. It took some time to develop standard training packages adapted to the civilian environment, but these basic courses have subsequently found their way into most other demining programmes, usually through informal channels.

One good example of the shift from military techniques to 'humanitarian' methods is the basic mine clearance team. Originally this consisted of three people - the metal detector operator, the prodder, and an observer. In the military setting, the observer also held a rifle to provide protection to the team. In Afghanistan, we soon eliminated the need for this position. The two person team was standard for some time, and then, in an effort to reduce accidents and improve productivity, we conducted trials on the "one man drill". Here, the deminer prodded his own detector reading, and one supervisor could watch up to four or five deminers. Initially the trial results showed the new method to be slower, until we discovered that a rumour had spread through the team that all the number two men were going to lose their jobs! After this rumour was quashed, productivity improved dramatically. This "one man" method has now been adopted in most programmes.

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Afghanistan:
In choosing technology for demining activities, careful consideration must be given to suitability in harsh environments and difficult terrains, costs associated with operation, transport, repairs and parts, in addition to opportunity costs

The Afghan programme also developed many other related activities - community based mine awareness, mine detecting dogs, and mechanical devices, long before the "tool box" approach was adopted. By 1993, the Afghan programme had grown to about 2,500 deminers, 100 dogs and two flail machines.

Although excellent field work had been undertaken, it took events in Kuwait and Cambodia to raise international awareness of the growing landmine crisis. Kuwait initiated a clearance effort on a commercial basis, but its US$ 800 million price tag and the high number of dead and injured contracted deminers, showed how this approach was beyond the financial resources of other mine-affected countries in the developing world. This implied the need for a sustainable, indigenous response.

When I first arrived in Afghanistan, I would not follow a dog in a minefield, but I left totally convinced of their usefulness in speeding up the survey and clearance process. Again, the dogs were initially assigned in the military way, "in support" of survey or clearance teams, but, after many studies and trials the situation was reversed, and the dog group leader was given the responsibility to declare that an area was cleared.

The situation I found in Laos was quite different to most other affected countries, although many of the principles and lessons learned in those programmes still applied. The problem in Laos was mainly air dropped unexploded ordnance (UXO) dating back 25 years to the Vietnam War period. In particular, small baseball size bomblets caused most of the injuries, and were in many ways similar to a landmine. The UN was particularly concerned by both the on-going loss of life and the effect of mines and UXO on development activities, so a specific Trust Fund was established to help initiate a programme. Due to the difficult access to most of the country's 10,000 villages, the Government had neither much detailed knowledge of the situation, nor the means to deal with it.

I must admit that I personally underestimated the extent of the problem until my first trip to the Plain of Jars area in central Laos. Returning from a site visit, we were stopped in village where a young boy had been killed after striking a partly buried bomblet with a machete. Unlike the first anti-tank mine blast victim I saw in Afghanistan where only his legs had been found, this boy only had a couple of fragment wounds in his forehead. Invariably, on subsequent field visits, I would see or hear about recent accident victims.

One of the first activities undertaken, in Laos, was a Level 1 (or General) Survey of the country. Handicap International, a NGO, won the contract and administered a questionnaire in about 7,000 villages. The results quantified the scale of the problem (still over 200 UXO-related deaths or injuries per year, 25 years after the war) and provided information on the socio-economic impact. The survey also enabled the Government to set priorities for the establishment of the programme, and it further identified areas where mine awareness and clearance work should be undertaken. The need to undertake a comprehensive survey and set-up a central database in the early phase of a mine action programme is now universally recognized. The situation in Laos also highlights the fact that the landmine problem will not diminish if left unchallenged, and that a long-term response is required.

I often drew the analogy, with visitors to Laos, that the UN was helping to develop a long-term, sustainable, local capacity to respond to the mine and UXO problem, similar to a "fire brigade" in a Western country.

Bosnia again presented a unique set of challenges in trying to create a national Mine Action Center. The political tensions between the three ethnic communities and two Entity Governments, Bosnia's proximity to Europe, a questionable willingness in some cases to have the mines removed, and the nature of the landmine problem (half of the estimated 30,000 mined areas contain less than 10 mines) were some of the more obvious differences that I came across.

Bosnia had a wide range of organizations operating in the country: commercial companies, NGOs, nationally employed deminers and the Entity Armies. The number of nationally employed deminers (funded by the UN) was quite low, mainly due to the high cost of labor (approximately $800 per month for a deminer in Bosnia, compared with $150 in most developing countries). While NGOs have provided the main response in most war-torn countries, it is interesting to note that, in 1997, over 25 companies bid for World Bank contracts in Bosnia. This trend towards commercial involvement is likely to continue as donors become increasingly specific about the results that they expect from their contributions, and as clearance tasks are linked more and more closely to major development projects.

With regard to the use of the military, general consensus has been reached worldwide that the military should not control mine action programmes. However, in Bosnia the Entity Armies were required under the Dayton Accords to conduct a specified amount of demining. Their work was largely ignored until recently, when an agreement was reached that they would work under the national plan, on tasks allocated and monitored by the civilian Mine Action Centre. This type of arrangement may well be relevant and replicable in other mine affected countries.

These trends, particularly the move to building long-term, local capacities involving a wide range of local and international actors, have been common to most UN-supported programmes. Other trends include the move towards the provision of sound quality assurance, with independent monitors checking work in the field. This is an advance on the situation in Afghanistan in the early days, where the deminers would line up and walk through a cleared area to prove to villagers it was now safe to use. The measuring of productivity has also advanced, from merely counting mines destroyed to calculating costs per square meter cleared and estimating the socio-economic benefits of land returned to productive use. One area where there has been a disturbing lack of progress is the field of technology. Deminers are still using the same equipment today that they were 10 years ago; and other than the increased use of dogs, no dramatic breakthroughs are in sight.

The United Nations has come a long way in a relatively short time, addressing a new challenge for which it had no prior experience in the humanitarian and development fields. I have been proud to be part of this process over the years, and humbled by the bravery and dedication of the "local deminers" with whom I have worked. Yet, every day, more mines are probably being laid than are removed. The Ottawa Treaty has mobilized unprecedented public support, but it is likely to require several more years of unwavering commitment by Governments, the UN and NGOs before the tide turns and we start to see a real reduction in the threat posed by mines to civilians around the world. 🟥

Jalalabad, Afghanistan: Humanitarian crises have required areas to be cleared for the temporary accommodation of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The task of clearing land of UXOs and mines for resettlement is part of an on-going process which links emergency relief to development.