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Interviews With HMA Directors: Ambassador Stefano Toscano

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AMBASSADOR STEFANO TOSCANO



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Ambassador Stefano Toscano has been the Director of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) since January 2014, bringing extensive experience in multi-lateral diplomacy and human security affairs following a rich career with the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As diplomatic collaborator in Berne (1998–2002), Ambassador Toscano grew familiar with the importance and potential of the humanitarian disarmament agenda and established close contacts with actors working on small arms issues. He participated in the discussions and work that led to the creation of the Small Arms Survey in 1999. As a Counselor at the Swiss Mission to the United Nations in New York (2002–2006), he was in charge of humanitarian, environmental, and migration affairs before serving as Vice Chairman of the 2nd Committee of the U.N. General Assembly. After returning to Switzerland in 2006, Mr. Toscano was Head of Section, Humanitarian Policy and Migration, at the Human Security Division of the Political Directorate, then Deputy Head of Division. In the three-and-a-half years before joining the GICHD, he was the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Swiss Embassy in Cairo. Ambassador Toscano holds a Ph.D. in natural science from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and a master's degree in international relations from the University of San Diego.

1. In your opinion, what are the main humanitarian mine action (HMA) and conventional weapons destruction (CWD) obstacles faced by organizations working in HMA, specifically the GICHD?

Strong national commitment, a solid implementation architecture coupled to efficient operations, and international solidarity remain the three key factors of successful mine action work at a national level. Experience shows that, once in place, these factors go a long way in ensuring the timely fulfillment of treaty obligations and the attainment of national completion targets. In some parts of the world, however, we are witnessing a changing working environment. Mine action actors are called upon to work closer to conflicts due to their prolonged nature and pressing humanitarian needs, including in relation to the return home of displaced persons. These conflicts represent complex operational contexts by virtue of their urban nature, the multiplicity of actors and risks, and the unprecedented large-scale use of improvised explosive devices (IED), which often function like mines. Mine action actors wishing to operate there face challenges pertaining to the necessary operational space and the technical complexity of improvised devices.

On the former issue, a reflection in the sector is on-going regarding the when and how to negotiate humanitarian access. Institutional mandates entrusted to regional or international organizations can sometimes offer entry points in that regard, as exemplified by the framework provided by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Ukraine. On the latter, the current revision of the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) is paramount and will provide much needed guidance on the search and disposal of IEDs in urban settings.

Turmoil and conflict have also affected the functioning of national mine action programs. In some instances, national capacities are yet to be built. This is a significant challenge, not least for the GICHD, which usually works with established national institutions. The mine action sector has been very innovative in supporting local partners in difficult circumstances, such as through remote training.

With respect to the need for a solid implementation architecture and efficient operations, let me emphasize the key role of international and national standards in accelerating treaty implementation. The IMAS play a decisive role in turning the obligations enshrined in the

conventions into reality in the field—as proven again and again in the 20 years since their establishment. It will be important to continue to make sure that they remain in sync with operational realities in the field.

Finally, on international solidarity: the 2025 and 2030 aspirational goals agreed upon at Maputo (3rd Review Conference (RC) of the *Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention* (APMBC)) in 2014 and Geneva (6th Meeting of States Parties of the *Convention on Cluster Munitions* (CCM)) in 2016, respectively, were important levers to renew the cooperation between affected States, donor States, and other stakeholders. Yet, international funding remains under strain, particularly with regard to so-called legacy contamination. The upcoming 4th RC of the APMBC (Oslo, November 2019) is a welcome opportunity to reaffirm once again our commitment to achieving mine-free status in all affected countries around the world within the next few years and to emphasize the essential enabling role mine action plays with respect to humanitarian action, peace and security, and sustainable development. Reaffirming that mine action is more than mine action and showcasing what that means concretely will help, I am convinced, to re-energize and broaden its support base.

You will agree that the three factors of success mentioned earlier are as much important to mine action as they are to ammunition management. During many years, much of our focus in ammunition management used to be on short-term interventions and physical improvements of ammunition storage sites. This approach can prevent a disaster but has been challenged by the observed lack of lasting change in the capacities of and commitment by national partners. In response, international partners have started to adopt a comprehensive and gradual approach to institutional, legislative, and operational changes in ammunition management practices. In parallel, a strengthened application of the International Ammunition Technical Guidelines (IATG) is being pursued. Encouragingly, cooperation and funding for ammunition management have gone up significantly in recent times.

2. How have your roles as an ambassador and a diplomat prepared you for being Director of the GICHD, and what lessons learned have been the most valuable for you?

Well, I do not know that my diplomatic career so far was necessarily meant to prepare me for my current position. But more seriously, it definitely strengthened my personal interest in all things humanitarian

and disarmament, including the correlation between the two, enhanced my *savoir faire* with respect to multilateral diplomacy, and showed me first hand, in the frame of the small arms/light weapons (SA/LW) process leading to the UN SA/LW Conference in 2001 that negotiated the Program of Action to Combat Illicit Trafficking in SA/LW, how multi-stakeholder approaches can make a real difference both at the normative and field levels. All this is fully relevant to my current position as Director of a Centre dedicated to mine action and ammunition management from a humanitarian perspective and at both multilateral and field levels.

As a diplomat, I often tried and worked based on the belief that the combination of innovative ideas, strong partnerships, and some money can go a surprisingly long way to address apparently intractable issues. That belief is also guiding me in my current position, as we at the GICHD work with our partners to promote the sector-wide development and application of innovative concepts, methods and tools, for example in the field of information management.

3. How do you feel the field of HMA has evolved since you became director?

The field of mine action has evolved significantly in recent years.

First of all, the wide recognition and year-long application of the land-release approach has transformed the underpinning narrative in mine action into one aimed at a progressive, evidence-based reduction of risks. This represents a fundamental “cultural” change towards a risk-reduction approach, a change that is fully reflected in the new strategy of the GICHD.

A risk-reduction approach goes hand in hand with an increased acknowledgement of the need timely to plan for the long-term management of residual risks—that is of those risks that we anticipate might still exist, but for which no evidence has emerged yet. We have witnessed important developments in this regard recently, especially in Southeast Asia. Several mine action strategies, for instance of Cambodia and Sri Lanka, now explicitly recognize such timely planning as a priority, and concrete action is taking place—the establishment of adequate legal, institutional, and operational frameworks in Vietnam being a case in point.

Noteworthy is also that mine action is, more than ever, understood as an enabler of broader agendas. The Sustainable Development Goals narrative to “go more connected” has certainly paved the way for that, whilst Colombia illustrated recently the positive contribution that mine action can make to peace processes. We now realize fully that being part of larger agendas is key for the sustainability and impact of our work and for others to benefit from what we have to offer.

Finally, I would mention the stronger orientation on results. As a sector, we now seek to achieve and demonstrate lasting change for what we do in terms of improved lives and livelihoods. This also responds to the wish of many mine action stakeholders for more accountability and transparency. In this same spirit, we have moved into a culture of “learning and adapting,” whereby we monitor, evaluate, and adapt our approaches constantly.

4. Going forward, what opportunities do you see for the GICHD to help the wider HMA/CWD community moving into the future?

In the development of our new strategy 2019–2022, we assessed extensively how the GICHD can best serve its partners in the future.

Building on our 20-year experience in support of mine action, we believe we are well placed to promote an approach that aims to reduce risks more broadly. This is why our underlying narrative has changed from humanitarian demining to the broader reduction of risks from explosive ordnance.

A significant element of it will be to help fill gaps in the safe and secure management of ammunition. Our experience in IMAS development, outreach, and implementation will be put to good use towards a strengthened application of the IATG. The Ammunition Management Advisory Team, newly established within the GICHD together with the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, will be a key resource to that effect.

In light of the remaining and new contamination, the need for efficient and effective mine action is undiminished. The GICHD’s core task to help develop and support nationally-owned, sustainable capacities remains in high demand and will continue to represent a key contribution of ours in the coming years. That said, we aim to enhance the sustainability of our support through an increased country focus.

I also see a continued role for the GICHD to help adapt the sector’s concepts, methods, tools, and standards to the new realities in the field. Think about operating in urban settings or dealing with more complex improvised devices. It is in the GICHD’s DNA to provide guidance on such pressing issues. At the same time, we will also lead on making established mine action concepts, methods, and tools useful for broader undertakings. The development of the Enterprise Geographic Information System (EGIS) for the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine is a case in point. Fact-finding and reporting belong to the SMM’s tasks. The EGIS will facilitate this by using state-of-the-art reporting and mapping tools—well known in the mine actor sector—to improve the flow of information between SMM’s field teams and its headquarters.

Furthermore, we see an increasing need for platforms for dialogue and cooperation, for example in support of the country-focused approaches currently fostered under the APMBC and CCM. Regional and bilateral exchanges among affected countries also still yield untapped potential. This is a role that we are committed to offering for the benefit of our partners.

Finally, through the recent integration of the Gender and Mine Action Programme into the GICHD, we will be able to multiply our efforts to turn the gender and diversity agenda into a reality in the field. Working to see more women in mine action, involved in building solutions, and to help talented women and youth with diverse backgrounds grow in their careers, will be part of it.

5. While working in HMA, what experience, lesson, or event has impacted you in your role as Director the most?

My first mission as Director of the GICHD, two months into the job, was to Cambodia, Vietnam, and Lao PDR. What I saw there—the impact landmines and cluster munitions have had and were still having on the lives of so many people, the dedication of the mine action community to address these challenges professionally and speedily, and the positive role the GICHD was playing in supporting these efforts—all this is still with me today and represents a formidable source of motivation. What I also appreciate much is the common sense of purpose, collaboration, and solidarity that characterizes the mine action sector—sort of a victory of cooperation over competition for the benefit of a good cause. This is far from obvious and very inspiring. ©