

AFGHANISTAN: A MODEL FOR A HUMANITARIAN MINE ACTION

*The report and the two that follow examine the problem of landmines in Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Mozambique and the role of the United States to help eradicate them. The articles were prepared by **Hayden Roberts** of the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. Roberts notes that the indiscriminate use of persistent landmines (those that do not self-destruct or self-deactivate) in Afghanistan left the country with perhaps the greatest level of mine contamination in the world. Since 1988 the United States has been helping to rid Afghanistan of its deadly legacy, teaching its people how to avoid landmines, and rendering assistance to landmine accident survivors.*

THE LANDMINE PROBLEM

Afghanistan remains one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. The widespread and indiscriminate use of persistent landmines for more than two decades by many armies and factions has been one of the most brutal aspects of conflict in Afghanistan. Mine contamination affects almost all regions — more than 1,500 villages in 27 of the country's 29 provinces were mine-related problems in 2002, according to the UN. While the UN estimates that the country is infested with five- to seven million landmines, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) say that, based on their experiences clearing mined areas, the UN estimate is too high. Regardless, Afghanistan remains severely affected. The most heavily mined areas are in the provinces bordering Iran and Pakistan. Mines are located in agricultural fields, irrigation canals, and grazing areas, as well as on roads and in residential and commercial areas. Landmines also encircle major cities, airports, government installations, and power stations. Casualties caused by landmines are estimated at 150 per month.

Following careful analysis of the immense landmine threat in Afghanistan stemming from the Soviet occupation, the United States began demining assistance to Afghanistan in October 1988 by establishing a comprehensive mine clearance

program. This program, which was eventually taken over by the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) Mine Action Program for Afghanistan (MAPA), is the world's largest and most productive demining effort, and it is staffed almost entirely by Afghans. The MAPA's use of local managers and employees, the transparency of its operations, and its diversified funding sources have served as a model for other humanitarian mine action programs elsewhere. Assistance through the MAPA and other government outlets continued when the United States formally established the U.S. Humanitarian Demining Program (now officially referred to as the Humanitarian Mine Action Program) in October 1993.

U.S. PARTNERSHIPS

U.S. mine action in Afghanistan is being provided directly, as well as through the UN. Contractors and NGOs are supplying technical skills, training, and oversight for demining operations throughout the country. Their focus has been to clear and return land to productive use, provide a safer environment for reconstruction activity, and to educate the general population on the dangers posed by landmines.

Since 1993 the United States has provided nearly \$51 million to support humanitarian mine action in Afghanistan. This assistance has paid for mine-risk education programs, minefield surveys and markings,

training of deminers, mine clearance, survivors' assistance, equipment, and mine-detection dogs. Afghanistan is currently the largest recipient of U.S. government mine action assistance in the world. In fiscal year 2003 (FY03), almost 17 percent of U.S. government funding for mine action worldwide (\$8.3 million out of \$49 million) went to Afghanistan. The Leahy War Victims Fund, administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), provided \$1 million in assistance to support socioeconomic reintegration of mine survivors and other persons with disabilities and for training Afghan orthopedic technicians. The United States awarded a \$2.3 million contract to RONCO to teach modern demining skills to local NGOs and to support MAPA and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) training. The HALO Trust, an experienced non-profit demining organization, received \$2.1 million toward mine clearance operations and UNMAS received \$2.6 million to fund local NGOs working in Afghanistan. Currently, the Department of State is providing qualified, experienced personnel to assist MAPA to conduct skills transfer and capacity building for the Demining Agency for Afghanistan (DAFA) and other MAPA-supported NGOs. The Department of State is also providing limited equipment to the MAPA.

In addition, the Department of State encourages U.S. and foreign civic associations, nongovernmental organizations, charitable foundations, and corporations to collaborate in public-private partnerships to reinforce humanitarian mine action worldwide. One such partner, a California-based NGO called Roots of Peace, has used money donated by corporations and even American school children to support demining teams in Afghanistan's Shomali Valley. Roots of Peace is taking its good works a step further by supporting the replanting of grapes and other fruits for which the Shomali valley was once famous, so that its farmers may once again sustain themselves.

PROGRAM CONCERNS

By late 2002 MAPA had expanded its operations to 253 mine clearing teams, employing over 7,000

Afghan personnel. However, security has become a growing concern. Most demining operations in Afghanistan have been limited to the area of Kandahar. After a series of attacks on demining staff, the UN Mine Action Center halted demining activities along parts of the road between Kabul and Kandahar on May 8, 2003, and, after another attack in mid-May, it announced that deminers in six provinces would travel with armed escorts provided by local authorities to ensure their safety. Despite security concerns, demining operations have resumed.

U.S. ACCOMPLISHMENTS

U.S. support for humanitarian mine action in Afghanistan enabled more than 1.8 million refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their homes in 2002 alone. In addition, the 23,825,611 square meters of high-priority areas cleared in the first quarter of 2002 have enabled the MAPA to employ more than 9,200 farmers and industrial workers. Agricultural outputs (valued at \$14.2 million) and livestock production (valued at \$43.4 million) have increased.

Demining operations by HALO Trust in 2002 and 2003 covered a large geographical area and removed thousands of mines from the ground. Through June 2003, HALO demining teams working in the provinces of Kabul, Parwan, Baghlan, Balkh, Kunduz, and Takhar cleared a total of 11,608 mines. A total area of 1,015,129 square meters was cleared by manual teams, and 279,668 square meters by mechanical teams. In addition, 1,335,748 square meters were surveyed. In June 2003, the United States assisted in the destruction of over 10,000 anti-tank mines in Afghanistan's Kandahar province. These landmines were located in an unsecured ammunition supply point where terrorists had access to the explosive materials. Teams from RONCO, DAFA, and Handicap International Belgium destroyed the mines in nine days according to international standards. Progress has also been made demining along the Kabul-Kandahar road construction project. With funding from international donors, including the United States,

and the UN NGOs have also instituted a number of educational programs and mine-risk education campaigns in various areas. Finally, all known sites affected by unexploded cluster munitions from

Operation Enduring Freedom have been, where access has been possible, surveyed and are now being cleared.

