

## The role of the military in mine action

Ian MANSFIELD

Over fifty countries in the world today suffer from one particularly long-lasting legacy of conflict—anti-personnel landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). In countries like Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia and Iraq, the presence of landmines represents a major threat to lives, and hinders reconstruction and development efforts. Regardless if the landmine threat is the result of a long-past conflict or restricted to a particular geographic region, it still causes unwarranted social and economic problems. Landmines affect the wider economic and social fabric of an affected society.

Mine clearance was once seen as a ‘military problem’ and troops were often assigned to mine clearance duties before demobilization, such as at the end of the Second World War. Though this may be consistent with the obligations under international law of parties to a conflict to be responsible for mines, booby-traps and other explosive devices laid by those parties, it does not necessarily lead to substantial remediation of the problem in humanitarian terms. With the increased use of anti-personnel landmines in a random and indiscriminate way (as a guerrilla warfare weapon) and the increase in internal conflicts, millions of landmines have just been left behind at the end of conflicts.

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988 spawned a new sector in the relief and development world—that of ‘humanitarian demining’ or mine action, where civilian organizations took the lead in dealing with the landmine threat. However, at first glance it seems that the military would still have a leading role to play in the issue. Military actors have a knowledge of mines and explosives, are trained and equipped for the task, and are used to working in a controlled and disciplined environment. However, addressing the problem of landmines involves more than just removing them from the ground. Due to the slow nature of mine clearance, public safety education campaigns are needed, surveys are required to locate unmapped mined areas, suspect areas must be marked, and the needs of mine victims addressed.

### *The definition of mine action*

According to the International Standards for Mine Action (IMAS),<sup>1</sup> ‘mine action’ refers to ‘activities which aim to reduce the social, economic and environmental impact of mines and UXO’. It is noted

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Since July 2002 Ian Mansfield has been the Operations Director at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), responsible for all operational, technical and research activities carried out by the Centre. Prior to this appointment, he was the Mine Action Team Leader at UNDP headquarters in New York. His field experience includes being the programme manager for the United Nations mine action programmes in Afghanistan, Lao and Bosnia. Before joining the United Nations, he served as an engineer officer in the Australian Army for twenty years, and had worked in Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Canada and the United States, as well as held a variety of command, regimental and training postings in Australia. This article is drawn from *A Study of the Role of the Military in Mine Action*, conducted by the GICHD and published in September 2003.

that mine action 'is not just about demining; it is also about people and societies, and how they are affected by landmine contamination. The objective of mine action is to reduce the risk from landmines to a level where people can live safely; in which economic, social and health development can occur free from the constraints imposed by landmine contamination, and in which the victims' needs can be addressed'.

Mine action comprises five complementary groups of activities:

- mine risk education;
- humanitarian demining, that is, mine and UXO survey, mapping, marking and (if necessary) clearance;
- victim assistance, including rehabilitation and reintegration;
- stockpile destruction; and
- advocacy against the use of anti-personnel mines.

A number of other enabling activities are required to support these five components of mine action, including: assessment and planning, mobilization and prioritization of resources, information management, human skills development, management training, quality management and the application of effective, appropriate and safe equipment.

Mine action actors include a wide range of organizations. A number of international, specialist demining NGOs were formed in the late 1980s, and some existing NGOs such as Norwegian People's Aid and Save The Children, took on mine action projects in addition to their traditional roles. Local mine action NGOs have been established as well, particularly in Afghanistan. In some countries, like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, commercial companies play a large role, particularly with mine clearance and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) contracts. In other countries, such as Cambodia and Lao, mine action programmes were established with the responsible government body hiring its own demining staff. Finally, the military, both local and visiting, has played a role in mine action.

A number of states have significant military mine action capacities. Indeed, many armed forces possess considerable expertise in managing and overseeing humanitarian demining and EOD programmes, especially in emergency situations. Despite the involvement of military personnel in many mine action programmes (in some of which they represent the core assets), military units have not been deployed consistently within national programmes. Furthermore, organizations such as the European Union, the United Nations and the World Bank, as well as many individual donor

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governments, have policies that do not readily support military capability in mine action, humanitarian or not. The funding policies of major donors and many donor governments may even have been a key factor in the marginalization of military mine action efforts. It is possible, therefore, that the full potential of military or joint military-civilian mine action programmes has not been appreciated—either by the programme organizers or the donor community.

The Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) has recently completed a study examining the role of the military in mine action.<sup>2</sup> The study was commissioned by the United Nations, and sought to address issues such as the suitability, appropriateness and capability of the military to undertake mine action. The findings show that while using military actors in mine action is not always appropriate, militaries can play a positive role in some aspects.

### *The use of the military in humanitarian mine action*

Two main types of military personnel have the potential to carry out mine action tasks: the members of the national armed forces of the mine-affected country ('local military forces') and military units or individuals from armed forces other than those of the affected state ('visiting military forces'). Local military forces may be carrying out a national mine action programme, either acting as the national authority or as a component of a national programme, or may be providing soldiers to be trained as deminers under a 'military to military' training scheme. These schemes normally involve a visiting military force assisting the local military of a developing nation.

Visiting military forces may be composed of military units and individuals deployed under a UN or other peacekeeping mission, on a landmine-specific assignment, or under some other arrangement. Visiting military forces may include individual instructors or technical advisers assisting in UN-sponsored mine action programmes, instructor teams under bilateral 'train-the-trainer' programmes, or specialists in support of specific parts of national programmes (such as teams establishing mine dog detection projects, mine risk education projects, or information management systems). Assistance may also include the provision of equipment, but experience has shown that heavy military minefield breaching equipment (usually based on a battle tank) is not suitable for humanitarian demining. These sixty-tonne vehicles are designed for military minefield breaching (that is, just punching lanes through a minefield during a battle) and it cannot be guaranteed that all mines will be cleared.

A number of bodies and institutions have looked at the broader role of the military in humanitarian affairs over the past decade. In January 1994, for instance, the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (now the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs—OCHA) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) jointly hosted a conference on the use of military assets in humanitarian operations. This conference produced a set of guidelines for when and under what conditions these assets should be used:

- Military assets should be used for life-saving and life-supporting operations;
- They should be used only at the request of the government of an affected state, or at the request of the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs with the agreement of that state;
- The assets should integrate with and support existing disaster relief response;
- They should operate under an integrated civilian management;
- They should be at no cost to the receiving state; and
- They should be, in principle, unarmed.

In 1999, a set of guidelines<sup>3</sup> concerning UN involvement with the militaries of mine contaminated countries for mine action activities were developed to complement the UN mine action policy<sup>4</sup> adopted the previous year. The original UN policy stated that 'training or support for mine action will not, in principle, be provided to the militaries of mine contaminated countries'. One of the reasons for this decision was that at the time the policy was developed in the mid-1990s, the UN experience with mine action programmes involved Angola, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia and Mozambique. In these countries, it was argued that the 'military' had been part of the problem and not the solution.

However, as the United Nations role in assisting mine-affected states grew, countries like Thailand, Jordan and Nicaragua were establishing mine action programmes based around, or with heavy

involvement of, the military. Many of these countries had signed the Mine Ban Convention and were seeking support from the United Nations. It was argued that the militaries of these type of countries were well organized, disciplined and under civilian government control, and thus should play a role in the national landmine response. As a result, the UN policy was revised and the new guidelines were approved by the Inter-Agency Coordination Group on Mine Action during a meeting chaired by the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations on 25 January 1999.

The revised guidelines stressed the UN principle of neutrality and impartiality, but recognized 'nonetheless that the militaries of mine contaminated countries could contribute to humanitarian

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mine action'. It was acknowledged that the military often have the necessary technical knowledge and expertise, particularly in the area of mine clearance. The guidelines also recognized that the primary responsibility for taking action against the presence of landmines remains with the affected state, which has a right to determine which implementing mechanisms and arrangements should be established. It was agreed that the United Nations would look at providing assistance on a case by case basis, but a strong preference was given to situations where the overall coordination, control and priority setting for mine action was the responsibility of civilian authorities. In particular, priorities for mine action should be established in the context of the humanitarian, reconstruction and development requirements.

### ***Select findings from the GICHD study***

#### USE OF LOCAL MILITARIES

Local armed forces begin with some advantages in mine clearance. They typically have experience with landmines and other UXO, their salaries are already paid, they possess a logistics support system, including communication and medical back-up, and are organized to operate as a team. Local military forces may have the necessary equipment for demining, but if not, this can be provided by visiting forces bilaterally or multilaterally.

In many contexts, military forces have been widely used in mine action, including humanitarian demining, although with varying degrees of success. In Nicaragua, for instance, the Nicaraguan army has carried out all demining. Its effectiveness has been greatly enhanced by support from visiting military forces operating under the auspices of the Organization of American States. On the other hand, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the use of Entity Armed Forces in demining has been expensive and demining accidents unacceptably high in the initial phases when compared to commercial companies and NGOs. The armed forces in Cambodia have made a relatively limited contribution to humanitarian demining to date, though the GICHD study recommends that their role and contribution be reviewed, due to the recent improvements in organization, training and equipment of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, and the declining donor funds available for civilian mine action structures in-country.

Military forces often operate in environments where information is restricted and controlled, and may be reluctant to provide data and information to others. This makes coordination difficult, if not impossible, and duplication and gaps likely. In many contexts, local military forces are reluctant to accept coordination or instruction from a civilian authority. This appears to be the case in Cambodia, for example. In Lebanon, the military has seemed reluctant to accept external advice on mine action, although information sharing has reportedly improved. Similarly, in Nicaragua, after early difficulties, coordination with the National Demining Commission and visiting military forces seems to have significantly improved.

Clearing mines for humanitarian purposes demands specific expertise, which may not be gained as a result of ordinary military training or experience. This has been noted in such places as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Cambodia. Also, morale among deminers serving in local military forces may be low, depending on salary and conditions, and conscripts do not make the best deminers. It should not be forgotten that military deminers are first and foremost soldiers and as such will be used as combat engineers if hostilities re-emerge. Similarly, in the aftermath of an internal armed conflict, the national army may not be perceived as neutral and may not be welcomed by affected communities. In these situations it is better not to use the military, or to assign them tasks that do not bring them into contact with a community, like the clearance of military barracks or airfields.

The GICHD study did not find much evidence of the use of the military in areas of mine action beyond mine clearance. While the military may be able to provide warnings about the technical dangers of landmines and UXO, it is not suited to undertake community-based mine risk education programmes, where social issues and helping to develop alternative coping mechanisms are important. In a few cases the local military may have provided immediate medical care to a civilian mine victim, but it does not become involved in the provision of prosthetics or rehabilitation activities. Very few militaries anywhere in the world have played an active role in calling for a ban on anti-personnel landmines. The one other area where the local military has been seen to play a significant role is in stockpile destruction in those countries that have signed the Mine Ban Convention. Destroying stockpiles requires logistic support, such as inventory control, transport and unpacking prior to destruction. The local military can undertake these labour-intensive tasks.

#### VISITING MILITARY FORCES

Many armed forces possess considerable expertise in mine action, including managing and overseeing humanitarian demining and EOD programmes, especially in emergency situations. The positive elements they may bring are experience, knowledge of techniques and advanced EOD skills, and in a number of cases familiarity with the International Mine Action Standards. A number of the case studies in the GICHD study, notably Bosnia and Herzegovina and Nicaragua, show that demining accidents have been reduced due to training and oversight from visiting military forces.

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However, in mine-affected countries where there is both military and civilian involvement in the mine action processes, visiting military forces tend to view their mission as fulfilling a rather narrow service. Cooperation and coordination with civilian structures are not always accorded adequate priority, which can lead to compartmentalization of the assets being delivered. Certain missions may even be undertaken without any direct knowledge of the civilian organizations operating in the same theatre.

Bilateral arrangements between militaries can often be appropriate when the local military is largely or entirely in charge of a country's mine action programme. Such agreements, however, may not provide an adequate planning and programming framework when there are multiple local and international actors involved, as programming complexity increases exponentially as the number of actors increases. As an example, it is possible that a National Mine Action Authority or a UN Mine Action Centre may be working in conformity with its locally adapted standards, but a visiting military force may be trained on a different interpretation. The IMAS represent an international set of standards that may be adapted and interpreted differently by each host country, making no two countries' technical procedures or standing operating procedures exactly alike. Often, such disparities will become evident only late in the programme cycle as an increasing amount of operational responsibility is assumed by the national authority. The implications of this may involve duplication, unnecessary cost

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or the need to re-clear land. Again, the need for a strong, central national coordination body established early in the life of a programme is seen as important in avoiding these situations.

UN peacekeepers have rarely engaged in large-scale humanitarian demining or EOD tasks (Kosovo being a notable exception). Thus, although UN peacekeepers have been present in Lebanon for more than two decades, they have typically conducted only mine clearance to support their own operations, and according to their national military procedures. In fact, throughout the more than twenty-year existence of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), as seemingly simple a task as the handover of records concerning mine clearance work between incoming and outgoing contingents appears not to have been accomplished.

#### USE OF MILITARY TECHNICAL ADVISERS

Visiting militaries often assign military personnel to serve as technical advisers (TAs) to the various mine action centres and project implementation units. Many of these have performed admirably, and the secondment of active military personnel appears to have been a successful strategy for getting a mine action programme up and running in an emergency phase and in highly specialized roles, such as EOD.

However, the overall contribution of these secondment programmes has been modest in the longer term. There have been criticisms of the role played by some TAs, on the basis of unclear chains of command and reporting lines, and confused terms of reference. Nor are TAs necessarily experienced in building local capacities through advising their local counterparts. It has also been claimed that coordinating authorities have sometimes failed to exploit fully their skills and potential contributions to the programme. A number of the case studies contained within the GICHD study, while acknowledging an important role for in-kind military advisors at the outset of a mine action programme, express concern about their contribution over the longer term in a development context. This is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Cambodia in particular, where TAs may not necessarily have been equipped with the skills needed to sustain mine action.

In 1999, for instance, the Cambodian Mine Action Centre hosted seventy-six TAs, both military and civilian. A review by UNDP concluded that, 'while the military has made an impressive contribution in developing capacity within the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC), particularly technical capacity, in general military advisers are less suited to meet the training needs and capacity demands CMAC now faces'. Indeed, TAs may end up learning more about mine action than do their national counterparts. These difficulties are compounded by tours of duty—typically six months—that are often too short for the individuals to make an effective contribution to the programme.

TAs can represent a very high cost for a mine action programme. The incremental costs associated with any foreign duty assignment of personnel from visiting military forces may be at least as high as the full cost of engaging equally well-qualified civilian personnel for the same assignment. In addition, a different framework for employment would allow for the termination of the assignment of an employee whose performance proved to be unsatisfactory—something that cannot readily be done with personnel seconded on a temporary basis from a visiting military force.

## PEACE AGREEMENTS

Whenever the impact of mines and UXO justify a mine action programme, ceasefire agreements and peace accords should consider and address mine contamination and mine action activities, including measures for their enforcement. Although the timely provision of military minefield records following the cessation of hostilities contributes positively to humanitarian demining, too often essential mine-related issues have either not been addressed at all in ceasefire agreements and peace accords, or addressed too late and inadequately.<sup>5</sup> The issues that must be covered in a peace agreement include exchange of technical information between parties to the conflict, minefield marking and mine and UXO clearance, an end to the use of anti-personnel mines, stockpile destruction, and international cooperation and coordination. As soon as a civilian coordinating authority has been established, it should take over responsibility for mine action. In the interim, it is preferable for the United Nations to assume the coordination role as a stopgap measure (most likely during a peacekeeping operation), rather than use either of the militaries of the former warring parties.

The UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations has called for mine action activities to be implemented during the peacekeeping phase ‘in such a manner that their viable continuity is guaranteed to the maximum extent possible’, and has specifically recommended that troop-contributing countries follow national and international standards for mine action.<sup>6</sup>

## ENHANCING COMBAT CAPACITY

The provision of assistance to local military forces for mine action purposes, in the form of training and/or equipment, has sometimes been controversial as these can also enhance combat capacity. The nation providing military assistance must carefully consider the potential ramifications of supplying training or equipment to a military force. The historical evolution of the conflict, the current peace and reconciliation developments as well as the nature of the military structure and deployment must all be weighed against the potential benefits of military support for mine action prior to the provision of assistance. There is no set mechanism to decide this, as most military to military assistance is provided on a bilateral basis.

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## DEMOBILIZATION

Finally, the linkages between demobilization and the creation of a long-term mine action capacity have been insufficiently studied. The GICHD study found that the idea of using demobilized soldiers as deminers is often discussed at the end of a conflict, but in reality this has not occurred in any organized fashion. Ex-combatants may often end up working as deminers in either government programmes or with NGOs, but this has happened more by chance and on an informal basis rather than as part of a deliberate programme. It would seem that demobilized soldiers would have some knowledge of explosives, are used to working in a disciplined environment, and that social benefits may derive from former combatants working together. On the other hand, the transient lifestyle of a deminer does not help with reintegration, former combatants may not have been sufficiently trained during their military service, or the local people may not trust former soldiers to demine their land.

## Conclusion

The GICHD study on the role of the military in mine action found that the military has played a significant role in a number of national mine action programmes. This includes through involvement by the local military forces, or with support from a visiting military force. Invariably, at the end of a conflict, local militaries will need training and equipment to enable them to undertake humanitarian demining tasks according to international standards. The decision to provide such support needs to be carefully weighed against the risk of enhancing their war fighting capabilities and what phase of the post-conflict period it is. The study was unable to determine if it was cheaper to use the military for demining tasks, as productivity and cost-effectiveness are areas that require further research in the whole mine action sector. The use of visiting military forces, on the other hand, has been found to be most effective in the emergency or start-up phase of a national mine action programme.

Wherever there is a mine or UXO problem, humanitarian and developmental initiatives necessarily involve a high degree of contact and interaction between military personnel, non-military mine action

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personnel and local communities. Military capabilities, if properly directed and controlled, can bring important skills and organizational assets to complement many mine action activities, particularly in the emergency or start-up phase of a programme. Military organizations are normally trained to be mission-oriented and to complete these missions as quickly and efficiently as possible. This works well for almost all military problems, and

indeed for many humanitarian problems like infrastructure repair, but establishing national mine action programmes under post-conflict conditions normally requires a longer-term approach than a military, 'task oriented' one. Military actors are unlikely to have the best idea how mine clearance fits into the larger mine action picture.

The component activities of mine action have to be closely coordinated if they are to work at all and military staff are well versed in the concept of how numerous interlocking components make up a whole. Mine action planning has to take place with a number of different agencies, both military and non-military, which often have different perspectives and agendas. All the actors must be prepared to submit to overall coordination and direction. This does not mean interfering in the established military 'chain of command', but that the broader issues like national strategies and priority setting for all aspects of mine action are developed in a consultative manner with the full range of actors.

## Notes

1. *International Mine Action Standards*, 04.10, second edition, 1 January 2003, available at <<http://www.mineactionstandards.org/imas.htm>> .
2. Available at <<http://www.gichd.ch>> .
3. *United Nations Mine Action and the Use of the Militaries*, approved by the Inter-Agency Coordination Group on Mine Action during a meeting chaired by the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations on 25 January 1999, available at <<http://www.undp.org/erd/devinitiatives/mineaction/militari.pdf>> .
4. *Assistance in Mine Clearance—Report of the Secretary-General*, United Nations document A/53/496 of 14 October 1998, Mine Action and Effective Coordination—United Nations Policy, Annex II, p. 31, available at <[http://www.mineaction.org/unmas/\\_refdocs.cfm?doc\\_ID=280](http://www.mineaction.org/unmas/_refdocs.cfm?doc_ID=280)> .
5. See Inter-Agency Coordination Group on Mine Action, 2003, *Mine Action Guidelines for Ceasefire and Peace Agreements*, available at <[http://www.mineaction.org/countries/\\_refdocs.cfm?doc\\_ID=1461](http://www.mineaction.org/countries/_refdocs.cfm?doc_ID=1461)> .
6. *Comprehensive review of the whole question of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects*, United Nations document A/57/767 of 28 March 2003, available at <<http://www.un.dk/doc/A.57.767.pdf>> .