

Mine Action and Security Challenges

Mostly from the 1979 Soviet invasion and an internal conflict from 1992 to 2001, Afghanistan is affected by a wide array of landmines and explosive remnants of war and remains highly contaminated (approximately 650 square kilometers [250 square miles] are currently contaminated). Recently, insurgents have added to the contamination and this hinders the ability of the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan¹ to clear the land. MAPA is committed to developing innovative approaches to mine action, including implementing Community Based Demining, to facilitate demining and to relieve mine-affected communities.

by Abdul Qudos [Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan]

The Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan is committed to gradually reducing the impact of mines and explosive remnants of war; clearance will provide the people of Afghanistan with safe access to areas previously contaminated by landmines and ERW. The MAPA plans to clear all recorded mine/ERW contaminated areas throughout the country if the security situation allows demining teams to work in these areas but only with continued support from donors.

A stable security situation is vital for conducting safe and effective demining operations, and this is a difficult challenge in countries where fighting is ongoing. This challenge is most prominent in a country like Afghanistan where most of the victims of mines and other ERW are innocent people who live in remote areas where security is unstable and demining operations are risky and expensive to conduct.

Background

Past experiences show that deploying normal demining teams to insecure parts of the country is dangerous. Working in areas where there is no government control means putting the lives of demining personnel at risk; this danger is not the known risk of mines

or ERW, but rather the additional risk that deminers may be kidnapped or killed. In fact, most teams working in such areas have received verbal warnings from unknown gunmen or written messages from unknown senders to stop demining operations or be killed.

Demining organizations working as MAPA's implementing partners have suffered an increasing rate and severity of security incidents. These incidents have ranged from personnel abductions and theft of equipment to direct attacks and ambushes, sometimes resulting in the death or injury of demining staff. Unfortunately, many of these attacks take place in areas that greatly need clearance, as well as humanitarian and development activities. Consequently, some demining organizations have ceased deploying demining teams to parts of the country where there is a security problem.

Organizations within the program including the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan have received many reports of civilian casualties caused by mines and ERW in insecure parts of the country. Local populations have made numerous requests for demining services, explaining how their suffering is caused by the presence of mines and ERW. These reports and requests prompted MACCA



Training session for Community Based Demining team.
All photos courtesy of Mafad Khan Amiri/MACCA.

and some demining organizations to seek other ways to alleviate the problems landmines and ERW were causing in the insecure parts of Afghanistan. One solution is to create Community Based Demining teams.

Community Based Demining

In consultation with the MAPA implementing demining organizations that have extensive experience in demining throughout Afghanistan, it was decided to develop Community Based Demining teams to assist with clearance in Afghanistan's insecure and remote locations. The basis of the CBD concept is a strong community liaison and the involvement of trained community members who are recruited to work as deminers under the guidance of a small number of technical advisors from the experienced demining field staff. The



Community Based Demining team is walking to its demining site.

local deminers employed by the CBD programs are less likely to be harassed and attacked by local groups that oppose the government, as they have the support and trust of the local community. The experienced field staff is embedded within the affected communities to train and oversee local residents to carry out mine-clearance operations in their own communities. With the help of the experienced demining staff, not only do the CBD teams learn to properly clear mines and ERW and thereby help their communities become safe, but they also earn a wage for the work they do. All CBD deminers are funded by the donor community through the implementing demining agency.

Community Based Demining is a concept that has proven successful in several insecure parts of Afghanistan. In the Nowzad district of Helmand province, a historically tumultuous region, there were many accidents among residents subsequent to

the fighting between the Taliban and Afghanistan government and Coalition Forces. In response to this, MACCA and some demining organizations worked together to establish CBD teams to conduct clearance of the contaminated areas. Although the situation was too risky for an outside demining team, these local teams were able to begin successful clearance operations,

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which are ongoing. In the Tani district of Paktya province, CBD teams were also employed, successfully clearing most of the contaminated areas in that district, and in the Ghazni province, CBD teams have been effectively employed to demine otherwise inaccessible regions. With more than 20 successful CBD projects ongoing throughout the country, it is anticipated that the CBD approach will provide a stabilizing financial dividend through employment and investment in local communities, and through the clearance and end use of cleared land.



Map of Afghanistan.
Courtesy of CIA Factbook.

Challenges

Although CBD reduces some of the security threats, it does not eliminate them. In fact, the program has been experiencing some challenges. Although there have been some incidents, including two prominent kidnappings in December 2010,² the deminers were soon released safely with the intervention of community elders because most members of the CBD teams were from the mine-affected communities.

Alternatively, the kidnapping of 32 CBD project members in Farah province, Afghanistan in July 2011, which resulted in the killing of four of them, shocked MAPA as well as the people of Afghanistan. Although the other 28 deminers were returned unharmed through the mediation of community elders, all CBD operations in this region were suspended. It is still unknown who was responsible for this brutal action. The

government of Afghanistan, as well as the Taliban, condemned the kidnapping and killing of the deminers, who were working to serve people.

The Future

The bottom line is that a continuation of such events will seriously damage the normal demining operations of CBD projects and will consequently result in the increase of civilian casualties in the communities located in insecure parts of Afghanistan. Ongoing insurgency and an unstable security situation not only continues to hinder mine-action assistance, but it also exposes the lives of innocent people to the danger of mines and ERW.

However, strengthening communication with influential community elders and convincing them of the importance of demining operations for the safety and security of the local populations can help to minimize the risks to



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deminers. Educating the community on the benefits of demining operations and demonstrating these benefits is the best insurance against attacks on deminers. Further, bringing money and jobs to mine-affected communities through CBD will help to minimize resentments and hostility toward demining groups. By using CBD, and thereby benefitting the local community, MAPA hopes to continue to expand its operations to other mine-affected regions currently inaccessible to demining teams. ◊

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