The people of Afghanistan are finally reaching the end of 13 years of bitter conflict which have divided the country and left behind many painful legacies. Whilst the effects of the war will be felt for many generations, a more dangerous and frightening legacy is already threatening the rebuilding of the fragile economy. Mines!! Current estimates are that around 10 million mines were laid by all sides during the war. These mines pose a hidden and deadly threat to the residents and returning refugees of Afghanistan.

The UN realised in 1988, after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, that the mines problem would pose enormous difficulties for the expected mass repatriation of refugees to Afghanistan. A Mine Clearance Programme under the auspices of the Office for the Co-ordination of United Nations Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes relating to Afghanistan (UNOCA) was established in 1989. The original concept of the project was to train thousands of refugees in the techniques of mine clearance and equip them with the basic equipment for mine clearance activities. The people who were trained were then to return to their villages and conduct mine clearance in their immediate area. This concept did not succeed as the expected mass repatriation did not occur. It was therefore decided that mine clearance needed to be conducted on a more organised basis. For this reason and others the Mine Clearance Programme has developed into its current format.

The aim of the Mine Clearance Programme is to concentrate its limited resources on clearing the key areas of Afghanistan to assist in the economic rehabilitation of the country. There is neither the funding nor the capability to clear every mine in Afghanistan in the short term. The emphasis is on clearance of areas for economic and agricultural development.

The Mine Clearing Programme currently includes mine awareness, mine survey, mine clearance and training programmes organised as follows:

- Demining Programme Headquarters (DHQ), Islamabad which is responsible for the coordination of all aspects of the Programme and coordination with UN agencies and other aid organisations operating in Afghanistan.

- Demining Offices (DO) in Peshawar, Quetta and Kabul which are responsible to DHQ for the regional co-ordination of all aspects of the Mine Clearance Programme and the coordination and conduct of training in their region.
- Mine awareness agencies (OMA in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Sepah in Iran and ARCS in Kabul) which are responsible for all mine awareness training.

- Mine Clearance Planning Agency (MCPA) which is responsible for the survey of suspected mined areas, the setting of priorities for clearance and the production of survey maps for the clearance agencies.

- Mine clearance agencies (ATC in Peshawar, SWAAD in Quetta and HALO Trust in Kabul) which are responsible for the clearance of mined areas which have been surveyed by MCPA. ATC retain a small mechanical clearance capability however most clearance is done manually.

- Mine Dog Detection Programme (MDDP) is responsible for the training and handling of mine detection dogs which assist the survey and clearance agencies in their tasks.

There are essentially four stages to the mine clearance programme. These are:

- Mine awareness training - This training is conducted in refugee camps in Pakistan and also inside Afghanistan to inform people of the threat of mines and signs which indicate the presence of mines.

- Mine survey/planning - Teams of trained surveyors attempt to define the boundaries of mined areas by a combination of means including local knowledge, mine's signs and clearance of safe lanes. These boundaries are drawn on survey maps which are used in clearance operations.

- Mine clearance - Teams from the mine clearance agencies clear minefields previously identified. There are two different clearance methods - manual and mechanical. The majority of mine clearance is done manually as there is only a limited mechanical capability.

- Repatriation/rehabilitation - Once the mine clearance is completed the final phase of the programme is the repatriation of residents and returnees to the cleared areas. Returnees are advised of which areas have been cleared. Other suspected mined areas which have been surveyed by MCPA are identified by permanent marking.
Attempting the planned and systematic clearance of unmarked minefields in a potentially unstable security environment is a daunting task. The inherent difficulties of this task are made more difficult by the following factors:

- The mines problem in Afghanistan is immense. It is estimated that there were around 10 million mines laid during the course of the fighting. In addition there are many thousands of unexploded rockets and shells laying on the ground, all of which pose a threat to the lives of the residents and returning refugees of Afghanistan. The fact is that it will take many years to remove the mines and other reminders of 13 years of war. Estimates of the time vary but it is likely to be at least ten years before the priority areas of Afghanistan are cleared of mines. Some areas of economically unusable terrain (e.g. mountainous areas) may never be cleared.

- Funds for mine clearance are a constant problem. Despite the fact that mines must be cleared before other development can commence, there is a constant shortage of funds for this project.

- The local security situation in Afghanistan can become unstable very quickly. In some instances vehicles used by mine clearance agencies have been kidnapped and held for many months by people who wish to make a political statement. In other instances teams have been prevented from working in districts because their security could not be guaranteed by the local authorities. These sorts of difficulties have caused unnecessary delays to this vital project.

- The extremes of hot and cold weather in Afghanistan make mine clearance difficult or impossible (e.g. it is impossible to clear mines when there is several feet of snow on the ground or the high temperature makes it difficult to hold the metal prodder).

- Afghanistan is literally littered with metal fragments from exploding artillery shells, bullets, bullet casings and thousands of other metal items left over from the war. Each fragment appears to the metal detector to be a mine, and must be treated with the same caution. This involves a time consuming process of prodding by hand until the fragment is unearthed and proven to be harmless. In 1991 Mine Clearance Programme agencies found 22,000 mines but unearthed 3,500,000 fragments. This is an average of one mine for every 159 fragments, or 0.6% of detections which are actually mines.
Requests for emergency assistance from aid agencies and local authorities cause delays to the Mine Clearance Programme. In simple terms the programme does not have the resources to clear every minefield in Afghanistan at the same time. There are 30 provinces, 389 districts and unknown thousands of minefields in Afghanistan to be cleared by 28 manual and 2 mechanical demining teams. It is clearly impossible to be everywhere at once and delays between requests for assistance and actual clearance will and must occur. There are currently proposals being evaluated to make the programme more flexible, including the establishment of emergency response teams, however these measures are necessarily constrained by limited resources.

In all areas where the programme has so far operated (12 provinces in 1991) the results have been gratifying and clearly appreciated by the local population. In areas such as Khost, Paktia province where MCPA and ATC teams have been operating for the last 18 months, the deminers are welcomed enthusiastically by the local population who appreciate the dangers and difficulties which the mine clearance programme involves. The only complaint is that there is not enough teams. The following comments illustrate the impact which mine clearance has had on the lives of residents and returnees in the vicinity of Khost:

a. When the Russians came they planted mines in my fields. Then the mujahideen planted other mines. Two of my goats were killed and I could not cultivate my fields. I worried that my children would be killed by mines. Now that the mines have been cleared from my fields I am much happier because I can sow my crops and my children are not in danger. I pray for the health and success of all those who helped me by clearing the mines.


b. I am sixty years old. Three months ago I returned to my village from Pakistan after five years in the refugee camps. Five days after I arrived my six year old son was killed by a mine, the red flag beside my land marks his grave. Rahim Gul, my other son was killed by a mine 16 days ago whilst trying to plow the fields. Now I am happy that the demining teams have cleared my field so that I can plow my fields in safety. I only wish that it could have happened 16 days earlier. I pray for your efforts that you may save other fathers, who have not yet lost their sons, from the grief I have suffered.

The Mine Clearance Programme is aware of the need to look to the future. Planning is already underway for mine clearance operations on a larger scale in a free Afghanistan, and different methods of expediting the process are constantly being evaluated. Future plans are naturally constrained by a lack of resources however planning is conducted in the hope that some of the resources which will be used to rebuild Afghanistan will be directed into this vital programme.

The successes of the Mine Clearance Programme are obvious to anyone who has seen the former minefields around Khost, Kunar, Kandahar and so on, glistening with their newly sown crops of wheat or being peacefully grazed by flocks of sheep tended by their youthful shepherds.

The programme often has a high cost. Eighteen deminers have been killed and 30 others maimed or injured in the last three years. Nevertheless, it is a vital programme which must be encouraged so that Afghanistan can be rebuilt and its people can work and live without the constant threat of this tireless and invisible enemy. Additional funds would allow the programme to expand in an organised and systematic way. What the programme needs most of all is the understanding of its beneficiaries and other aid organisations. Understanding that this is a relatively small programme undertaking a massive task, the full enormity of which is still not known. Understanding that we cannot meet every request as soon as it is made and understanding that all members of the programme are striving, at all times, to do the best we can to help in the happy task of rebuilding our homeland after the ravages of this bitter and divisive war.

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