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Coordination in Mine Action—Challenges and Opportunities

by Martin Barber

In this article I will highlight some of the challenges and opportunities of working on coordination and policy development in mine action within the United Nations system, as well as vis-à-vis non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”), local governments and political actors. I will also briefly touch upon some of the most immediate tasks ahead in this field for the United Nations and its partners.

The United Nations has been involved in the coordination of humanitarian mine action since 1989 when the first coordinated humanitarian mine action programme was initiated in Afghanistan. Mine Action work at the United Nations has come a long way since then. The United Nations mine action teams of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), now operate in thirty-five countries and focus on a wide range of activities including: making sure that affected countries have a clear picture of how and where mines impact the most civilian populations through comprehensive Landmine Impact Surveys; developing and implementing mechanisms to meet mine action requirements in emergency situations; responding to requests from national governments to build local mine action capacities; ensuring that the highest quality and safety standards are applied during mine clearance operations; advocating in support of the universalization and implementation of two major international instruments: the Antipersonnel Mine Ban Treaty (Ottawa Convention) and the Convention on the Prohibition of Certain Conventional Weapons.

The United Nations Mine Action Service was established in 1997, within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, to provide a focal point in the United Nations to deal with the policy and operational aspects of the landmine issue. UNMAS is charged with the coordination of all aspects of mine action within the UN system, and is responsible for ensuring an effective, proactive, and coordinated response to mine contamination worldwide. UNMAS is also responsible for providing mine action assistance in the context of humanitarian emergencies and peacekeeping operations. UNMAS’ work is guided by two important documents, both of which have been approved by the General Assembly and are reflected in the yearly resolution issued on this matter by the GA. These documents are: “Mine Action and Effective Coordination: The United Nations Policy,” and the “United Nations Mine Action Strategy 2001-2005” (A/56/448/Add.1), which is a road map of the United Nations

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work in this field for this five-year period. All major United Nations agencies, including UNDP, UNICEF, United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), World Food Programme (WFP), etc. participated in the course of 2001 in a complex process that led to the identification of six major strategic goals and over forty specific objectives to be achieved and timelines for completion for each of them. The latest Report submitted by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on assistance in mine action at its current (57th) session (A/57/430) reports on progress achieved against this strategy.

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A review of the Resolutions establishing current and previous peacekeeping operations indicates how the mine action issue is relevant in many different contexts. I will just recall a few here: freedom of movement for peacekeeping troops, humanitarian workers and local civilian populations; transit and return to areas of origin of displaced populations as is the case in Angola, Afghanistan and has been the case in Cambodia; post-conflict reconstruction efforts, including agricultural recovery, or infrastructure building, as is the case in Afghanistan; and as a “tension-reducing step”, as demining activities along the buffer zone in Cyprus are referred to by the Security Council (S/Res/1034/1998). This list illustrates that mine action work requires more than just technical expertise to be effective. Mine action work has significant political implications, and it is no accident that conflict and post-conflict situations are the environments within which mine action programmes are usually initiated.

By virtue of its unique combination of technical, humanitarian and military dimensions, mine action can draw interest and commitments from a wide range of actors. At the headquarters level, UNMAS deals on a daily basis with non-governmental humanitarian and advocacy organizations such as, the International Committee of the Red Cross (“ICRC”) and the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate International Campaign to Ban Landmines, as well as, with operational mine action NGOs, technical governmental agencies, the military, and the defense private sector interested in producing and selling specialized technology. In the field, in addition to the entities mentioned, there are blue helmets or international coalition troops, local authorities and warring factions, and partner UN and NGO humanitarian agencies. The challenges faced trying to pull it all together are quite remarkable, but so are the benefits.

I will now discuss a few observations on how we endeavour to make relationships with our partners effective. Lessons learned in the set-up, implementation and transition to national authorities of mine action programmes are crucial, as these programmes rely on cohesion of all partners and strong political backing of donor

governments, local authorities and warring factions. And they must closely liaise with the national military and any international forces involved on the ground.

In the mine action world, we have learned that support comes only with well cultivated relationships which are sustained over time. Support is also made possible where *both* UNMAS, if at Headquarters, or the MACC (Mine Action Coordination Centres), if in the field, *and* the other party clearly see the added value in providing rather than with-holding support, in keeping each other regularly up to date of significant developments rather than just occasionally based on the crisis of the day, and in discussing actions and designing programmes in partnership rather than separately. Relationships then are not ad hoc sporadic contacts, but continued efforts that—to put it simply—need to “go both ways”.

In working on coordination, we have applied concepts, borrowed from the humanitarian world, which use agreed upon standards and establish clear mechanisms to spell out the terms of the relationship. In 1998, an Inter-Agency Coordination Group on Mine Action was established. The IACG draws membership from all relevant United Nations agencies and departments and provides a forum to prioritise activities, discuss ongoing operations, and identify unmet needs. The Steering Committee on Mine Action expands this group to include representatives from key NGOs and international organisations.

We have found that applying internationally recognized standards and processes drawn from the best practices in mine action around the world, helps to raise the confidence of the communities that the mine action partners are assisting. It also provides the additional and significant benefit in the medium-term of elevating local mine action capacities to international standards of quality. Unfortunately, these efforts are not always appreciated. Recently in Eritrea, the Government asked several international NGOs to cease humanitarian de-mining operations and to leave the country, on the grounds that their work was too slow and too expensive. Safe mine clearance operations are inevitably slow, since they must ensure that every single mine is located and destroyed.

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I will now discuss some of the most immediate tasks ahead for the United Nations in the field of mine action. We have been asked by the General Assembly to review the five-year United Nations mine action strategy in the course of this year and we will focus on this between April and June. At the time of writing, the prospects of a possible military conflict in Iraq are being discussed at the Security Council. We are putting our best efforts, along with the rest of the UN humanitarian

agencies, to be ready should such an eventuality occur. We have spent significant energies in 2002 to finalize a Rapid Response Plan, and if the occasion requires it, we will be ready to put it into practice. The programme in Afghanistan, which saw great expansion in the course of 2002, will require continued efforts to sustain and expand its current levels of operations. New programmes, in countries that do not enjoy the limelight of prime time news will also continue to require significant backstopping and guidance. We will conduct evaluations of some of our programmes in order to draw both lessons and best practices. The United Nations Development Programme will give special attention to the study of transition from international to national ownership of mine action programmes.

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The year 2002 saw quite dramatic developments in the mine action field. In Afghanistan and Angola, probably the two worst mine affected countries in the world, the political scene has changed for the better; mine laying activities have stopped, and both governments have acceded to the Convention. In Sudan, UNMAS signed, in the margins of the Fourth Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty, an agreement with the government and the SPLM (Sudan's People Liberation Movement). The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cyprus also acceded to the Antipersonnel Mine Ban Convention in recent months. All of these remarkable and positive developments oblige us to do more work with the same resources. Being able to rely on productive and effective relationships with our partners will be all the more critical in the months to come.