

Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA)

CLEARING LANDMINES AND EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR FROM BAMIYAN WORLD HERITAGE SITES



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1. BACKGROUND

In March 2008, the Government of Japan and the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) formed a partnership in order to clear the mines and other Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) from the UNESCO World heritage sites in Afghanistan's Bamiyan district. The Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA) was responsible for coordinating these activities in partnership with UNESCO. The budget for the project was just over \$2,000,000.

ABOUT BAMİYAN

Situated on the ancient Silk Road trade route between China, the Middle East and Europe, Bamiyan is located in the Central region of Afghanistan.



Bamiyan is an area of stunning natural beauty and the ancient 'Buddhas of Bamiyan' were world renowned. These Indo-Greek style sculptures hewn out of the sandstone cliffs in the 6th century dominated the landscape at heights up to 53 metres. The picture below shows the image of the one of the statues in the 1960s.

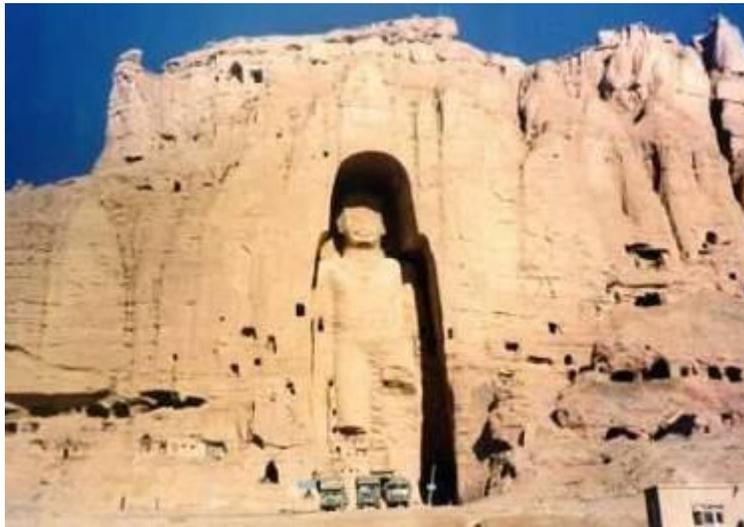


Photo: One of the original Buddhas of Bamiyan, the vehicles at its base highlighting the scale of the structures

However, in 2001, the Taliban destroyed the statues with dynamite, declaring them idols and therefore not allowed under Sharia law. Despite this damage, the site continues to be of great historical and cultural interest.





Bamiyan's historical sites are designated 'World Heritage Sites in Danger', with mine contamination previously considered one of the main threats. According to UNESCO, there are eight historically important areas in Bamiyan, four of which were contaminated by mines. The four sites thought to be contaminated were: the top of the Buddhas, Shar-e-Ghulgula (the ancient city of Bamiyan also known as the City of Screams), Shar-e-Zuhak (also known as the Red City) and Postai Fazil. Pictured below are Shar-e-Zuhak (left) and Shar-e-Ghulgula (right).



This project aimed to take a major step towards getting Bamiyan off the 'endangered' list. The photo below shows the Buddha niches which remain today and UNESCO are working to stabilize.



Photo courtesy of Associated Press

Given these assets, along with the natural beauty of the area, Bamiyan has huge potential for tourism, which could in turn provide a valuable pillar for strengthening the economy and development of Bamiyan and indeed Afghanistan as a whole.

This is in line with the Afghanistan's National Development Strategy (ANDS), which as well as specific mine action goals, has a broader goal to *'reduce poverty, ensure sustainable development through a private sector-led market economy'*, of which tourism could play an important part.

Finally, but importantly, mines are a threat to the lives of people in Bamiyan with 138 mine-related accidents registered, resulting in 35 deaths and 103 injuries recorded in the last ten years.



2. PROJECT SUMMARY

Due to the importance and fragility of the historical site of Bamiyan, UNMAS formed a partnership with UNESCO to ensure protection of the site during the demining operation.

Demining operations were carried out by long-term Afghan partner of the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA), Afghan Technical Consultants (ATC).

Timeline of Project

Phase One: Clearance of contaminated areas in Central Bamiyan, excluding the four historical sites. This contained 17 suspected hazardous areas (SHAs). As a humanitarian priority, it was seen as important to clear the hazards in central Bamiyan district before progressing to the World Heritage Sites. Phase One also included village by village explosive ordinance disposal and was completed in 2008. Please note however that this report focuses on the clearance of the historical areas only.

Phase Two: Focused approach to clearance on Bamiyan historical sites in partnership with UNESCO. This covered the four historical sites thought to be contaminated. Although this accounted for only 6% of the total contamination in Central Bamiyan, the sensitivity of the work required a slow and careful approach using extreme caution to avoid causing any damage to the site. Phase Two was broken by the winter season. It began in September 2008, then halted due to the onset of winter at the start of November 2008, resuming again in the spring of 2009. It was finally completed in September 2009.

Demining Assets Employed

A range of demining assets were employed to complete the clearance. The core manual demining teams were supported by mine dog teams, mechanical demining units and Explosive Ordnance Disposal specialists.

Coordination

Effective coordination was a vital aspect of this project and this was carried out by the MACCA with excellent results. It involved working with UNESCO, ATC, District Government representatives including the Bamiyan Governor, Directorate of the Ministry of Information and Culture, Chief of Police, and Head of National Security as well as UNAMA and the PRT in



Bamiyan. Meetings with all stakeholders were held prior to beginning the project and then regularly throughout the course of the project to ensure security and maximum effectiveness of the teams once deployed. As part of the coordination function, MACCA also provided the external quality assurance to the programme.

UNESCO Partnership

UNESCO archaeologists received special Landmine Safety Programme (LSP) training in order to equip them for working in a mine/ERW impacted field environment. In addition, the deminers who began work in the historical areas were provided with specialist training from the archaeologists so that they would be fully equipped to safely and effectively demine the delicate archaeological site of Bamiyan. Continuous direct liaison is ongoing between UNESCO and mine action partners in Bamiyan and at the coordination level.

3. SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS

Mine Clearance

The demining teams successfully cleared all of the mined areas, both contaminated areas of Central Bamiyan and the four World Heritage sites ahead of schedule in September 2009.



In the historical areas, this amounted to a total clearance area of 445,916 sq m (21,700 cancelled through surveying) and 14 anti-personnel mines and 7,107 ERW were destroyed.

While the teams were working in the historical areas, a specialist Explosive Ordinance Disposal team supporting the clearance teams responded to local requests for the disposal of explosive remnants of war reported. This resulted in the destruction of 14 anti-personnel mines and 7,380 ERW in 2009.

Historical Artifacts Discovered Through the Demining Operations



Above: This bracelet was discovered by a deminer working in Shar-e-Ghulgula



Above: This large piece of ancient pottery above was also found by a deminer working in Shar-e-Ghulgula



Above: These ancient coins were detected by a deminer working in Zuhak.



Above: One of the coins found at Zuhak



Above: This ancient ornament was found with the coins in Zuhak

Publicity

After the completion of Phase One, in 2008, a ceremony was held which included a number of high-profile personalities; the governor of Bamiyan, spokesperson of the provincial council, heads of different Government departments, MACCA Programme Director, heads of UNAMA, commander of the PRT and heads of aid agencies. As a special guest, Afghanistan's Olympic medal winner from the Beijing Olympic games – Mr Rohullah Nikpah – attended.

In 2009, the MACCA arranged a press trip for photo, film and print journalists from Associated Press – the coverage of this was broadcast widely globally and sparked off other media interest. Coverage highlights are available on the MACCA website (www.macca.org.af). Finally, once all the sites were completed a handover ceremony was carried out involving local Government, UNESCO, MACCCA, the donor (Government of Japan) and national and international media. At this stage, the protection and conservation of the sites was officially handed over to the Government, who is partnering with UNESCO to support them in this endeavor.



CHALLENGES OVERCOME

Approach to Mine Clearance in Historical Areas: As mentioned above, the clearance of the historical areas has meant the rate of clearance in those areas is slower than on most minefields. The deminers collected and put in sample bags any historical artifacts they found whilst demining. The deminers proved adept at carefully handling the artifacts according to Sorna Khakzad from UNESCO, *“probably because they are used to handling fragile things like mines”*. The deminers have also displayed a level of pride in their work here, comparing themselves to ‘goldsmiths’ due to the value of the land they are clearing.

NEXT STEPS

UNESCO is now archiving and assessing all the artifacts found in the course of the mine clearance operations. UNESCO and MACCA hope that these artifacts can form part of a special exhibition in Bamiyan museum, which is currently in the planning phase.