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## Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA)

### PRESS RELEASE

#### **Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan Supports the Clearance of International Military High Explosive Training Ranges in Afghanistan**

(September 28, 2015 – Kabul, Afghanistan) The existence of landmines and unexploded ordnance in Afghanistan are serious threats to the lives of millions of Afghan citizens. There are an average of 38 civilian casualties every month and another 61 civilian casualties are recorded due to pressure plate improvised explosive devices (IEDs that use mine-type explosives). One of these threats, however, is in the process of being removed in the largest, most complex clearance programme of its kind in the world. This is the clearance of explosive remnants of war (ERW) from former International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) high explosive training ranges under the coordination and implementation of the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA) and with the funding support of the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

The clearance of explosive ordnance is addressed under *Protocol V* of the *Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons* (CCW Convention, 1981).

In 2009 and 2010, a growing number of casualties were being identified as originating from the high explosive training ranges that were a part of most international military bases in Afghanistan, especially as these bases were closed down or handed over to the Government of Afghanistan. From 2009 to December 2014, the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan (UNMACA) recorded 130 casualties resulting from explosive remnants of war accidents in or around ISAF facilities. Of the 130 casualties, 75 percent were children. A total of 39 casualties were fatal. In addition, contaminated land is not available for productive use such as farming or grazing of livestock.

The training ranges were used by international forces to improve coalition force skills for different types of weaponry and to train Afghan national security forces. As the bases closed down, civilians had access to those ranges. This resulted in casualties due to the contamination of these areas by unexploded ordnance that had been left behind and became a danger to the neighbouring communities.

Following the reports of civilian casualties from these firing ranges, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), the UNMACA and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan lobbied ISAF to take responsibility for this hazard. Responding positively, in December 2013, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers signed a contract with an American company for clearance of 84 firing ranges that had been used by the U.S. military. The project began by identifying the ranges located across Afghanistan, taking into account the types of munitions used and clearing and closing the ranges in accordance with the Afghanistan mine action standards. To date, the project has cleared 732 square kilometres with 1024 square kilometres remaining: over 69,000 explosives have been removed. The project is expected to be completed in September, 2016. While similar training range clearance operations have been carried out by international forces in other countries such as Libya and Iraq, none have been on the scale of the ongoing operation in Afghanistan.

The impact of the clearance of unexploded ordnance is evident in the casualty statistics. In 2014, after clearance operations began, 19 casualties were reported from training ranges which is less than half of the 50 casualties reported in 2013 and 45 casualties in 2012. To date in 2015, no civilian casualties have been reported although two deminers have been injured. In addition to clearing operations, the project has conducted an extensive campaign to educate communities about the risk of mines and UXO on the ranges. As of September, 2015, over 500,000 civilians living near the ranges have received information about the UXO threat.

According to Jeffrey McMurdo, Programme Manager of UNMAS, *"these survey and clearance operations in Afghanistan by ISAF demonstrate the commitment of troop contributing nations to assume responsibility for the consequences of their test ranges. UNMAS welcomes this initiative which demonstrates ISAF commitment to protect civilian populations from the effect of explosive remnants of war, in the spirit of Protocol V of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)."* The UK is co-funding with the US the clearance of the joint US-UK Bastion training ranges. Germany, Spain and New Zealand have all indicated a preparedness to follow the lead of the United States and arrange for the clearance of the 17 ranges they had used. Discussions are ongoing with Lithuania and Sweden.

All clearance activities follow the guidelines of the Afghanistan Government standards. The Directorate of Mine Action Coordination (DMAC) carries out quality control and quality assurance activities. Following inspection, successful adherence to standards results in certification that clearance of the ranges was satisfactorily completed.

Coordination is carried out through the High Explosives Training Ranges (HETR) Working Group which includes representatives of troop contributing nations, Government, UN and INGO representatives.

*"The establishment of the HETR Working Group by ISAF and its ongoing efforts as part of the Resolute Support Mission is a clear display of the unwavering support and commitment of the International Troop Contributing Nations to address the latent threat Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) poses to the people of Afghanistan,"* said Colonel Calvin C. Hudson, the Chair of the HETR Working Group. *"The scale of this effort is unprecedented and its execution in the midst of ongoing conflict makes it even more difficult and dangerous work for those executing the clearance operations on the ground. Despite the many obstacles we face, we maintain our resolve and will continue to make every effort within the scope of our mission and resources to ensure the Afghan people are afforded the best opportunity to live safe, productive lives free of the threat of ERW on any of the former NATO HETRs."*

According to the Director of DMAC, Mr Mohammad Shafiq Yosufi: *"The Government appreciates the willingness of the troop contributing nations who have set this example for others to follow in other countries. I hope that all warring sides consider addressing post-conflict ERW clearance immediately after the conflicts are ceased ."*

**\*\*\* The END \*\*\***

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