

MAPA NEWS



Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan' Newsletter

February 2016

On mission to Afghanistan:

Paul Heslop, Chief of Programme and Planning at UNMAS New York



Paul Heslop - Photo by JC McIlwaine

In February 2016, a team of headquarters staff led by Mr. Paul Heslop, visited the Afghanistan programme to review operations and strategic planning. At the end of the trip, Mr. Heslop shared some of his views on the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan.

His first concern was the trend of decreasing donor contributions. "Most of the demining organizations in the country are facing a funding crisis. This is impeding the progress in

completing clearance operations, as per the Ottawa Treaty extension, by 2023. The lack of funding means that the MAPA will be 20% behind on its clearance target this year. The chance of achieving the Ottawa treaty obligations by 2023 and making Afghanistan mine free will not happen unless there is more engagement from the donors," he said. "It is really important to re-engage the donors to foster the understanding of the importance of mine action not only in terms of removing unexploded bombs, landmines or ERW but also from the socio-economic impact of having a country that is safer. For example, thanks to the clearance of land, communities are more likely to let their children walk to school and confident that their children can play safely without becoming victims of these hazards."

Despite funding challenges, one of the greatest success stories in Afghanistan has been the significant reduction in landmine casualties. "There used to be a hundred casualties a month and that has come down to five casualties per month, which is still too much," Mr. Heslop said. "Despite mine action being a great success story, over one thousand deminers have been killed or injured over the last 20 years. They have paid a terrible price in trying to make the country safe. The rate of demining accidents has come down, though, and it is rewarding to see that where we had hundreds of deminers killed and injured, we now have far fewer. This shows that UNMACA has been able to clear a high amount of land, has better trained deminers, better equipment and more importantly, a better understanding of what they need to do."

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"Japan shares the goal with UNMAS of the mine-free Afghanistan in 2023. Mine clearance sets a basic condition for development such as infrastructure and agriculture, which contributes to the improvement of the socio-economic situation in Afghanistan. Based on this belief, Japan has been assisting mine clearance projects through United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund for Assistance in Mine Action. Japan will continue to assist the efforts in the nation building by Afghanistan in various areas."

- Mr. YASUNARI MORINO, Chargé d'Affaires ad interim of Japanese Embassy, Kabul

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Losing a daughter: A mother's most horrible nightmare

Zohra's mother shares her story of facing the unthinkable – death of her daughter.

“My 10-year old daughter Zohra's school holidays had just begun, but we wanted Zohra and her younger sister to go to the mosque for Quran-e-Karim tutoring for which both girls had reluctantly agreed.

It was the second day of her holiday at exactly 13:00 hours when I heard Zohra's grandmother yelling at her saying that she was running late for the mosque. I was in the kitchen when I saw Zohra running towards me asking me to give her something to eat as she was running late.

After eating lunch the kids left. I, Zohra's uncle, his wife and my mother-in-law remained in the house. Zohra's uncle was tired and decided to take a nap. As part of our culture, I made some tea and we, the three ladies, sat down to have the tea and talk.

I remember telling my mother-in-law that even though I allow the little kids to go out, I am confident about their safety since they do not go far from the street, near our house and we fortunately live in the capital city.

We were having this conversation when the loud noise of the explosion shook the entire house. It felt like a 7 level earthquake that would destroy the house and the roof would fall down. The steam and dust in the air had covered the entire Dasht-e Barchi area I could barely see anything when I opened the window to check where the kids were and what exactly had happened, so I ran outside. Zohra's uncle followed me. My eyes kept looking for the kids. Originally, I was looking for my son Ajmal since he was playing there. I was sure that Zohra was going to her cousin's house after she was done with tutoring.

But we lost Zohra.” The brokenhearted mother who had never imagined losing her innocent daughter in an unexploded ordnance explosion that took place on 8 December 2015.

As a result of this explosion eight

kids and a worker were killed. The only eyewitness alive was Ajmal, Zohra's younger brother. Ajmal was entirely in shock and trembling as he started explaining the incident. “The following morning Aman, my cousin had brought his new bicycle and we were playing with it. Later, our friends Arash, Ali and Naseer joined to play with us. We all rode the cycle one by one. While Arash and I were waiting for our turn, Aman came to us with an old, dirty piece of iron in his hand. I went home to drink water, as Arash and Aman were busy cleaning the iron.

I was drinking water when I heard a loud sound of explosion that shook the entire place. It scared me so I run towards my house where I saw blood all over the yard and walls of our house. I ran back to the place where we were playing. I saw Ali lying on the ground injured. He told me to take his younger brother home immediately and could not say anything more than that. As I went to pick his younger brother up from the ground, I saw his sister coming. She then took him to the hospital.

Later, three ambulances came. I didn't know who informed them but they were taking the injured people to the hospital. They did not take my friends Ali, Arash and Naseer, as they were already dead.”

Ajmal paused as he said this his hands were shaking, his eyes went red and he burst into tears. I passed the glass of water to him and we managed to calm him down. After a little while he continued:



Zohra, victim of the Dasht-e Barchi incident

“We have been living in Dasht-e Barchi for seven years now but have never witnessed this kind of an incident. Aman my cousin brought that piece of iron to us, I heard Naseer and Ali saying that they would clean it, then sell it and we can eat soup from that money.”

Ajmal continued, “Ali was a very good friend of mine. We all used to play in this place. Zohra had gone to my uncle's house on the way back she was killed due to the explosion along with one worker and 8 other kids who used to play with us.

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On mission to Afghanistan:

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Mr. Heslop stressed that the UN is a neutral organization guided by humanitarian values. "What is particularly disappointing is the number of security instances that involve deminers in the last couple of years, and that the various factions seem to have started to treat deminers as combatants while they are there to help make the country a safer place. It is also particularly disappointing, because even when the Taliban were in control of Afghanistan, they were very pro landmine clearance. While Afghanistan was under Taliban control, the deminers were also seen as local heroes as Mullah Omar declared a jihad against mines."



Paul Heslop at UNMACA HQ in Kabul

On the question of transition, Mr. Heslop said: "The government of Afghanistan is now taking ownership of these issues. We have to do all this in a planned manner, as we do not want all this work to collapse

because of a transition that wasn't implemented correctly or was rushed."

Highlighting UNMAS's contribution to other programmes, Mr. Heslop added: "Afghanistan has been a country where a huge amount has been learned and a lot of sacrifices made in the early years of demining by Afghans. There has been a huge amount of knowledge and information transfer from Afghanistan to other programmes. There are many Afghans who are working as supervisors and office managers around the world and they influence mine action far outside the borders of Afghanistan."

However, after Afghanistan fulfills its obligations under the Ottawa Treaty, the deminers - who now total about 9,000 - will likely find themselves without work. Mr. Heslop is very aware of this. "Our job is to work ourselves out of the job," he said. "There is still a big challenge and we are talking about all the mines to be cleared by 2023. However, the possibility of having 9,000 men between the age of 20-50 becoming unemployed needs to be taken seriously. We are looking at some form of a reintegration process that will hopefully give them skills beyond demining, perhaps tools, training equipment, and vocational training. Certainly, if we are successful in making Afghanistan mine free, we will also have to figure out how we can allow the deminers to return to their communities and still be productive members of society."

Mine Action Strategic Planning Workshop

From 31st January to 1st February 2016, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) ran a two-day training and consultation workshop, aiming at developing a five-year Strategic Plan for the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan, held at Mine Detection Centre (MDC) in Kabul. This was a follow up workshop to the one before, held 18-22 October 2015.

Speaking at the opening ceremony of this workshop, Mohammad Shafiq Yosufi, Director of the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA)'s Directorate of Mine Action Coordination (DMAC) said, "It is a great opportunity for us to discuss diverse aspects of mine action, relevant treaties and other documents to be able to produce an inclusive strategy for the next five years." He added, "Mine action is one of the focus area for His Excellency Mr. Wais Ahmad Barmak, State Minister for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Affairs, and he is giving it full attention."

During the workshop, participants agreed on five main goals for the strategy to be focused on:

1. Facilitating development,
2. Engagement with other sectors,
3. Preventive action to reduce the impact of mines and ERW,
4. Responsive actions to mitigate the consequences of mine/ERW accidents, and
5. Gender and diversity mainstreaming.

Five working groups were established to continue working on expanding these goals. The strategy is aimed to be finalized and signed during first week of April 2016.

MAPA declares Adraskan district of Herat Province free of known mine/ERW

On February 21, 2016, the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA) passed another landmark of Ottawa treaty by successfully declaring Adraskan district of Herat province free of known landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) contamination in a ceremony held in centre of the city. The area cleared represents 874,431 m². Only four out of 15 districts are now remaining to be cleared in Herat province.

Due to the extent of clashes over the past three decades, this area was highly contaminated, registering a total number of 38 casualties (6 deaths and 32 injuries), 58 anti-personal mine, 7 anti-tank mine and 257 items of unexploded ordnance, resulting in the blockage of access to many facilities and resources including, agricultural and economic development projects.

The clearance operation in this district started in 1995, with different NGOs taking part in clearance, but due to security issue most of them withdrew, and the work was delayed.

With the clearance work carried by ATC, DAFA, DDG, HALO Trust, MCPA, and OMAR which was financially supported by UN Voluntary Trust Fund and DFID, Adraskan district's land was successfully handed over to the local authorities during the ceremony.

With this project, the surroundings of Helmand River has been cleared, which will also help facilitate safe implementation of the TAPI and Helmand River Basin projects.

Now that the hazards have been removed, this area can be used to meet the essential needs of people such as agriculture, health clinics, schools and roads, directly benefiting a significant large number of people living in the region.

Losing a daughter: A mother's most horrible nightmare

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Memorial of the 9 martyrs of Dasht-e Barchi incident

We have not been informed by anyone about the landmines and explosive materials. None of the kids knew about it. My father was the only person telling us to stay away from bullets as they might cause death.

After living this terrifying incident and losing my sister along with my friends my message to the other kids is that they should stay away from the explosive materials and never go to the places where there is possibility of danger."

This interview is conducted by Mr. Sohrab Rostayee, the UNMACA Advocacy and Public Information Associate and Mr. Mirwais Hussaini, DMAC/ITF Operations Assistant.

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