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Minefield as a School Ground: The Tzur Baher Minefield Clearance Project

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Deminers around the world clear land to make it possible for communities to safely build schools, as well as other structures.

Minefield as a School Ground:

The Tzur Baher Minefield Clearance Project

With so many factors limiting the education process in the Middle East, it is hard to believe that one more could be imposed upon the people of Tzur Baher, a village in Jerusalem. However, the presence of a minefield in their village severely hindered progress in the building of a school. Maavarim Civil Engineering Ltd. was brought in to begin work. The planned site for the school is now mine-free, and construction is scheduled to start in the near future.

by Bentzi Telefus [Maavarim Civil Engineering Ltd.]

When you think about building a high school, the last word that probably comes to mind is *minefield*, but that's exactly what the people of Tzur Baher considered. Clearing a minefield and returning it to civilian use is always important. When the purpose is to allow youth to obtain an education, this significance has added benefits.

Tzur Baher is a small Palestinian village on the eastern outskirts of Jerusalem where 15,000 residents live with only one general school for about 4,000 village children. Due to the lack of a public high school, those who do not find schools outside of the village get at most 10 years of basic education.

The community decided to build a new school, but available land was scarce. Most potential building sites in the village were in use for private housing, and the only public land under municipal control was the minefield in the western outskirts of the village, where the Jordanian Army emplaced mines before the 1967 War.¹

In 2000, the Israeli government and Jerusalem municipality approved a new public housing program that included building two new high schools and a public youth center. The building program

resulted from an Israeli Supreme Court ruling that forced the authorities to build schools for the villagers.

The decision regarding who would do the clearance and who would fund the clearance of the minefield caused a disagreement between the army and the municipality;² each side placed the responsibility with the other. The Israeli Defense Force claimed it is responsible for clearing minefields only when the clearance is a military necessity. Additionally, the IDF insisted that since the land is located on a Jordanian minefield, it was not the IDF's responsibility to clear it. The municipality, on the other hand, argued the IDF has the professional and public responsibility to clear the field since the municipality has no expertise in mine clearance.

The government's legal counsel made the final decision: Israel's Ministry of Justice decided it was the municipality's responsibility to do the work and ordered it to engage a civilian mine-clearance company to complete the project. The Ministry of Justice found that although the IDF was not responsible for emplacing the field, it was, nevertheless, responsible for verifying the professional quality of the clearance work. The court consequently ordered the IDF to give the

final quality assurance stamp of approval, verifying that all the mines had been removed.

Status of the Field

According to Ishay Telavivi, during the pre-project survey he found that the field had become a site for the disposal of building debris left on the boundaries of the minefield (creating a pile of more than 50,000 cubic meters [65,398 cubic yards]). This obstacle made the clearance project more difficult since the debris spilled over onto the land to be cleared, and the pile had to be removed before clearance could begin.

The minefield contained a combination of M-35 Belgian anti-personnel mines³ and some Jordanian AP mines.⁴ In the late 1980s and 1990s, the IDF removed some of the mines to minimize risk, but there was no certainty regarding the extent of the mines left. To make things more complex, over the years

stages of the project and to address any complaints that arose.

Maavarim's standard operating procedures, based on the International Mine Action Standards, led the planning and execution of the work on the Tzur Baher project from start to finish. The work on this site was a combination of a few methods. Although the survey and analysis of the field showed no evidence of anti-tank mines, to identify and dismiss the presence of this type of mine, Maavarim personnel marked the boundaries of the field and conducted manual demining using metal detectors.

Next, mechanical demining removed the land to a depth of 0.5 meter (1.6 feet) to the bedrock. In the last stage, Maavarim used specially trained mine-detection dogs to verify that all mines had been removed.

The Israeli Army provided supervision and final approval for the clearance of the



A large mine repository.

set a new precedent involving the areas of responsibilities of each body involved in civilian and humanitarian mine clearance. The decision to force the Jerusalem municipality to fund mine clearance and to force the army to then be professionally responsible for landmines it did not emplace is a model for mine-clearance activity in Israel—a model that hopefully will lead the way to clearing more minefields. ♦

This article was written with assistance from the project manager, Mr. Ishay Telavivi of Maavarim Civil Engineering Ltd.

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Children gather for Mine-risk education.

the residents encroached on the minefield boundaries to a point that some of the houses were built bordering the field. The presence of these houses made removing mines on-site much more difficult and called for a gentler and more accurate clearance process.

Clearing the Field

Demining companies in Israel must be approved by the Ministry of Defense and the IDF to assure compliance with quality-control standard operating procedures. Maavarim Civil Engineering has years of experience in contracting with the MoD for mine clearance and explosive ordnance disposal projects, and was chosen to conduct the mine clearance and to prepare the field for construction of the school. Because this project was undertaken on behalf of the villagers, a special Maavarim liaison officer was appointed to keep the villagers informed during all

field, accepting Maavarim's recommendation to approach this project according to IMAS, even though the IDF does not normally work according to IMAS.

Conclusion

The work on the site started in early September 2005 and was complete by the end of October. Construction will be completed by May 2007. The Tzur Baher project is an example of how mine clearance can influence the daily life of an entire village. From experience working with the demining industry in Israel, it is evident that government and private funds are rarely being spent on this type of activity unless commercial interests are involved.

This project is unique because this is the first time the Israeli Supreme Court has stated that the government is responsible for clearing a minefield that was not left by its army. Additionally, the Ministry of Justice



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