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## United Nations Assumes the Lead in Demining

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# United Nations Assumes the Lead in Demining

David M. Ahearn, Staff Writer

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In addressing the landmine problem, the United Nations (UN) has taken the lead in coordinating the efforts of non-government organizations (NGOs) with those of their own forces. The Secretary-General assigned this responsibility to the UN's Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA).

During recent years, much has been accomplished at the field level in the fight against the effects of landmines. Their efforts have shifted to the integration of the expertise and resources of the UN system with that of the NGO population at large. DHA is the primary agent of this integration.

The May 1997 issue of the DHA's "Policy for Mine Action" defines the current landmine problem in terms of immediate risk to people. The policy states that, while it is true that landmines are strewn across a vast portion of the globe today, land that is uninhabited or uninhabitable may be left uncleared for some time, based on the low immediate risk. The DHA may also choose not to take action when desirable land infested with anti-personnel devices is controlled by an entity possessing the ability to deal with the problem itself, leaving the resources of the DHA and other organizations to concentrate on situations of more dire need.

The DHA views the source of the current problem as twofold—the indiscriminant use of landmines has created large quantities of them across war-torn nations, and the prolonged life-cycle of the weapon because of the advances made in military technology. From this view, the DHA's main goal is to determine the extent of mine infestation in plagued countries and more efficiently establish a plan to prevent further injuries from occurring, returning the land and infrastructure to "productive and habitable use in the shortest possible time."

The DHA's approach to mine clearing and mine awareness as mandated by the Secretary-General is to "develop more formal working arrangements with all parties in order to outline more clearly the role each agency will play in the provision of assistance in mine clearance" (from the *Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly A/50/408* dated 6 September 1995). From this mandate, the DHA has established the following principles:

- action to address the mine problem must be taken as early as possible;

- the peace process should address the mine problem in the appropriate political framework necessary to insure the initiation of a mine action program as the security and political situation permits;
- aside from mine clearance, a mine action plan should also address the awareness issue in terms of information gathering, risk reduction and education, and the treatment and rehabilitation of casualties;
- elements of the plan should be carried out by those most capable to do so; and
- the primary responsibility for taking mine action rests with the concerned state.

While the primary responsibility for mine action lies with the concerned state, oftentimes the state is inherently incapable of demining its land and this ability must be developed. In this event, the DHA segment of the UN assumes the responsibility of capacity- building. Ideally, a political system would continue the work the UN initiates well after the UN is gone.

While the UN and its DHA is interested in education and mine awareness as a major part of mine action, the most important aspect is quick, efficient, mine clearance. As technology in this area improves, more emphasis will be placed on the education of locals regarding the use of such mine clearance equipment. The UN and its DHA realizes the mine problem is not something it should tackle on its own. The DHA's position is to coordinate the roles played by each department, agency, NGO, and government involved in the mine problem. While maintaining this distant position, the DHA is always prepared to intervene wherever gaps or weaknesses in the process develop.

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David M. Ahearn is a staff writer for the *Journal of Humanitarian Demining*.