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Opportunities for Regional Cooperation in Mine Action in Southeastern Europe

by Ian Mansfield,
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Introduction

At many of the international conferences held over the past years dealing with landmine issues, the meeting conclusions invariably contained a call for a greater regional approach to address landmine problems. In most cases these were just words, and at first glance there is little evidence of regional cooperation in mine action, or that such an approach would bring any immediate benefits to mine-affected communities.

The reason for this lack of a regional approach is partly due to the nature of the landmine problem itself. In general, the mines that have been deployed are buried in the ground and do not move over national borders. This is in contrast to other problems such as small arms, illegal drugs or diseases, which easily move across sovereign boundaries and obviously need to be tackled on a regional basis. In addition, UN resolutions dealing with landmines and the UN Policy states that “the primary responsibility for taking action against the presence of landmines lies with the concerned state.” Most donors have policies that reflect the UN response, and they set up or fund projects on a country-by-country basis. Lastly, although nations may exist in the same region, there may have been previous conflicts between them, or they often have language and cultural differences that make creating a regional approach difficult. For example, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam are all in the same region, but they have different languages.

The response to the mine problem in Central America is one example of a regional approach. It has been coordinated by the Organization of American States (OAS), but has tended to be mainly organized on a military-to-military basis, with a focus on mine clearance. SE Europe (and the Balkans in particular) seems to offer prospects for greater benefit from a regional approach. The Balkan countries have a common history and background, a similar government structure,

and most have the same spoken language. Also, dealing with all the aspects of mine action, including mine risk education (MRE), survey and clearance, victim assistance, stockpile destruction and the fulfillment of common Ottawa Treaty obligations, increases the opportunities available for a cooperative response.

Areas of Concern

Political Level

At the political level, there are already a number of organizations that deal with SE Europe on a regional basis, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Stability Pact. These organizations should be encouraged to develop programmes to strengthen the linkage between mine action and other sectoral responses. Some years ago, the “Reay Group” was formed under the auspices of the Working Table III of the Stability Pact to address the landmine situation. While the group has probably yet to reach its full potential, it does bring together senior government officials from the region on a regular basis to discuss political issues relating to landmines.

Another body, the Southeastern European Mine Action Coordination Committee (SEEMACC) was formed in 2000 and deals with more practical issues of coordination at the operational level. Probably the greatest area for cooperation at this level lies with the AP Mine Ban Convention (or Ottawa Treaty). The goal of a “mine-free Balkans” now seems achievable with the recent announcement by Serbia and Montenegro that it will accede to the Treaty (the last Balkans country to do so). The aim should now be for a “mine-free SE Europe.” All of the obligations of the Convention, including the requirement to clear all mines in 10 years, are achievable in this region.

Strategic Level

At what I would call the strategic level, it is unlikely (or unnecessary) that a regional mine action strategy would be developed for SE Europe. However, it

would be useful if all the national strategies or action plans developed by the countries contained common elements. The use of common terminology and standard reporting (based on the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) developed by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD)) would make elaboration of the mine problem more logical, and it would become easier to gauge progress. The development of national standards based on the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) would allow for consistency of operations, as would a common accreditation system for mine action operators in the region. For example, if a mine detection dog (MDD) company or a MRE operator is accredited to work in one country, that accreditation should be recognized in another country if the system is the same.

Operational Level

Most possibilities for regional cooperation probably exist at the operational level. There is already dialogue between Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro, over the clearance of bordering minefields. Shared use could consist of expensive or high-technology equipment. For example, if more regular use had been foreseen for the “Mineseeker” airship after its test in Kosovo, then its cost and work programme could have been distributed among the countries in the region. The allocation of specialist training responsibilities to avoid duplication has also started—two examples include the MDD centre in Bosnia and the underwater demining school in Montenegro. The IMAS can provide a common basis for activities like minefield marking systems, MRE messages, joint purchase of high-volume items or the sharing of lessons learned. Greater possibilities exist for regional training, to build on the management training courses already conducted by the UN Development Program (UNDP) through Cranfield University and local partner institutions. Sharing practical skills can be enhanced by more exchanges of national mine action

programme staff under the UNDP's Mine Action Exchange (MAX) programme. Opportunities should be explored for victim assistance activities, such as sporting competitions or cultural exchanges. Shared access to medical, prosthetic or psychological services may be an option, but taking people away from family or local support systems needs to be carefully assessed.

Technical Level

At a more technical level, the conduct of joint trials or testing of equipment would result in savings, or at least an agreement to share national level test results would help. The recent development by the European standards organization (CEN Working Group) of a standard methodology for metal detector trials should be utilized to the fullest extent. With regard to information exchange, the current work by the GICHD on the XML project will allow different databases to "talk" to each other and exchange data. The GICHD is about to expand on the Database of Demining Accidents (DDAS), which is a method of collecting reports on workplace accidents involving deminers from around the world. These reports will identify changes in techniques, equip-

ment or safety issues. A sub-set of this database could focus on accidents in a region to see if any specific problems occur. On a broader level, the setup of the Croatian Mine Action Centre (CROMAC) scientific council to tap into the local scientific community is quite unique in the world, and possibilities exist to expand this concept to a regional basis.

Funding

The final area to be considered is funding. The competition for donor funds, national budgets, responsibilities of governments when taking out World Bank loans and the project nature of funding tend not to favour a regional approach. However, the establishment of the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance (ITF) has introduced a new element to this situation in the Balkans. Despite some initial skepticism when it was established in 1998, the ITF has been able to serve as a conduit for other donor funds to the region—mainly due to the dollar-for-dollar matching arrangement with the United States. The fact that the ITF is located in Slovenia (a non-mine-affected country in the region) has added an air of neutrality about its operation,

and the ITF has been able to develop standardized tendering and contracting arrangements as well. The ITF has also been able to fund some regional coordination activities, such as the work of SEEMACC, which has helped them to function without drawing on national funds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, mine action has tended to develop on a national basis, despite the often superficial calls for a regional approach. However, the experience of the Balkans has shown that under certain circumstances, regional activities already in place have made a difference and that opportunities exist for increasing regional activities and cooperation in the future. ■

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