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On the Ground in Iraq

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on the ground in IRAQ

Background

MineTech International (MTI) has been stationed in southern Iraq since May 2003, working on humanitarian mine and ammunition clearing projects, and as part of its brief history, working to deliver rapid response demining support for the United Nations Office of Project Services (UNOPS).

MTI first arrived in Basrah with a team of around 90 explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) and mine clearance professionals including mine detecting dogs (MDDs) and dog handling teams. Four emergency survey teams were also deployed to carry out Level 2 technical surveys, initially to locate and identify explosive remnants of war within the southern Basrah governorate using the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) format. However, in June 2003, MTI's survey teams were retasked to conduct the National Emergency Survey, with the prime focus of gathering information to measure the effect of *Operation Enduring Freedom* in southern Iraq. As a result, eight survey teams have been working to identify populated areas within each of the eight governorates in southern Iraq and to identify the dangerous areas that are within close proximity to villages.

Southern Iraq comprises eight governorates from Baghdad to the Kuwait border in the south. The area is bounded by Saudi Arabia to the west, Kuwait in the south and a long land border with Iran to the east. The area has experienced three major conflicts: the Iran/Iraq War (1980–1988), the Kuwait Campaign (Gulf War) from 1990–1991, and most recently *Operation Enduring Freedom*. In their wake is an enormous accumulation of explosive remnants of war (ERW) among which the local people have been living with for the last

20 years. Ammunition that should have been destroyed has been dumped in rural areas—much of which has deteriorated over the years due to the high saline content in the soil.

Added to this is the large amount of ammunition stockpiled by the Iraqi military throughout the region. With the breakdown of law and order, much of this ammunition has been removed from storage so that the copper, brass and aluminium components can be separated and sold in Iran. The result is that the contents of munitions crates have been abandoned and spread over a wide area. There is also the threat of loose propellant having been widely scattered when looters trashed ammunition storage facilities. This has created safety issues not only for the local population but also for the EOD teams dealing with the resulting mess.

In the first few months of activity, the mine clearance teams made a concentrated effort to help farmers gain access to their land in time to prepare fields for cultivation, removing cluster munitions from agricultural land in the Az Zubayr region, near Kuwait.

Despite the dangers, local people appear to be largely unperturbed about the risks within their communities. This created some problems for the MTI survey teams who were frequently told that there was nothing dangerous within the community when, in fact, there were stockpiles of ammunition. More often than not, the children, shepherds and nomads proved to be the best source of information on the whereabouts of dangerous areas—not the village elders.

Basrah

The survey teams, initially working in Basrah, encountered a large amount of ordnance that had been left over from the Iran/Iraq War, in particular a high concentration around the Shatt Al Arab waterway, which was subject to heavy fighting. There had been no attempt by Iraqi governmental organisations to make the area safe for the local population. One particular minefield along the Shatt Al Arab water course is situated in a marshy area with up to 1.5 m of water in some places. The locals use dug out canoes to go about their business for fear of detonating mines. Their animals, on the other hand, wade



in to graze and regularly fall victim to the mines.

In the first week of July 2003, the Survey Teams deployed to the oil facility in Al Fao township. The teams surveyed from the lower Al Fao peninsula northwards. Highlights included the location and survey of a major minefield to the north of Al Fao that is hampering and blocking the rebuilding of homes, cultivation of agricultural land and fishing activities. The minefield was laid during the Iran/Iraq War and has a heavy metal contamination. The local people are clearing mines and UXO where they are identified.

South of Basrah, the teams found large quantities of ordnance ranging from stored ammunition to abandoned explosive ordnance (EO) from the last three conflicts. The EO was in varying states of condition and stability, with most sites containing large quantities of loose propellant scattered among the munitions. Additionally, another mined area was located 400–500 m south of the greater city limits of Basrah, which the MTI manual clearance teams cleared.

Of all the governorates surveyed, Basrah posed the most challenges to the survey teams. It had a high number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the province who were creating their own communities with “villages” literally springing up overnight. In the end it was decided that if the people considered themselves to be a community, then they would be surveyed as one. In practice, this meant teams were covering a far larger number of communities than the original mapping information suggested. The survey teams had to travel the road systems and rely on local sources of information to be able to guarantee they had picked up the required information and covered all of the villages in the area. Additionally, there was ERW strewn across the province from three previous conflicts. The levels of ERW contamination, particularly in the Basrah governorate, led the survey teams having to complete multiple dangerous areas for individual villages.

To the north of the province, the teams ran into security problems such as being warned off from entering certain areas, encountering potential hijack situations or having to address fundamental issues such as lack of electricity, water, medicine, and law and order.

The Threat From Border Minefields

Compared to the EOD problems, mine clearance issues in Iraq are of much less consequence, largely because there are few, if any, minefields in the country and these are mainly scattered defensive minefields located around a few ex-Iraqi military installations and are considered to be strategic installations, such as oil and gas fields or refineries. The significant exception is the entire length of the eastern border with Iran, which has been heavily mined, denying access to thousands of hectares of land. Currently, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) does not wish any clearance of the border minefields, although MTI personnel have completed a specific six-week mine clearance task to create a safe area around a key border-crossing water point. As movement restrictions have lifted, more people are moving to the Iran border, where the grazing is untouched. They are moving into minefields that are extremely dangerous and cannot compare with anything in MTI's experience. In the short time working in the border area, MTI personnel have evacuated six civilians who were injured after returning to the minefields with their livestock. Although the barrier minefields in the border regions are known, it has been reported that the area is prone to flooding during the wet season and consequently mines migrate into areas where people conduct agricultural activity—in some cases preventing farmers from producing crops. Mine awareness education will be vital to protect the families who are now returning to the area if nothing is done to tackle the minefields themselves.

Missan

During the first three weeks of October, the survey teams worked in the Missan governorate. There are limited Coalition Forces EO within the province and the main source of ERW is Iraqi in origin from both the former Iraqi army and the Iraq/Iran conflict. The Missan province had been home to an Iraqi Army Corps, thus there is a huge amount of ammunition stockpiled in various degrees of security and condition, ranging from permanent bunker facilities to open field storage sites. The main ongoing ERW threat remains in the bor-

der minefields laid during the Iran/Iraq War.

The Missan governate in many ways is an easier environment in which to work. The local people removed the Baath Party from power, liberating their governate without the help of Coalition Forces, and there was no conflict in the governate during *Operation Enduring Freedom*. MTI was given assistance by all local community leaders, which ensured a significant element of security, although problems with armed gangs in the southern portion of the governate did limit activity.

Once the survey along the various axes of the Missan governate was completed, the survey group moved to the town of Al Kut in the Wassit province, northwest of Missan, at the end of October. MTI was again welcomed by the local governor, who recognised the major problem with ERW in the province, both from field storage areas and from the minefields running along the Iran border. Here, the problem has been exacerbated by the number of Iranian pilgrims crossing the border illegally on pilgrimages to Shiite holy sites. As in Missan, mines are migrating from laid minefields into areas where local people carry out their daily business.

The survey teams continued operations in the Wassit governate in early November with the intention of moving to the Thi Quar governate, but due to the deteriorating security situation, the teams had to stop the survey approximately 40 km south of the Wassit/Thi Quar border. The main difficulties for the mine clearance teams were caused by the conviction among the local people that the survey teams were involved with, or part of, the Coalition Forces. Survey teams penetrated into the Thi Quar and Babil governates from the east and north; however, they did not continue due to the security situation.

The Legacy

What is apparent to everyone is the enormity of the problem still facing the Iraqi people. Latest estimates are that there are still 1,000,000 tonnes of ammunition scattered over Iraq, equivalent to more than half the stockpile of the entire U.S. military machine, and that figure excludes the minefields.

The final count of community villages surveyed was recorded as 1,029, with data collected on 527 dangerous areas within close

proximity to the villages. The impact on the population is continual and devastating. While deployed in the Missan province, a key project for the EOD teams from December through February of this year was the clearance of a school at Al Musharrhah, a town 40 km north of Almarah. This school, like many others in Iraq, had been used as an ammunition storage depot in the belief that Coalition troops would not target it. Unfortunately, the children managed to set off a portion of the stockpile, and the resulting explosion caused a wing of the complex to collapse, scattering ordnance throughout the school grounds. The EOD clearance teams in general now face a wide range of challenges, from both the scale of the project and the state of the explosive materials, which can be rusty and corroded, buried up to a metre deep.

In Az Zubayr, teams have been clearing EO remains from under three sections of collapsed roofing. Searching through the rubble is slow and tedious because the tar roof covering has melted into the rubble and congealed a lot of it into a semi-solid mass. Despite this, in one week the teams recovered 1,609 items weighing 7,905 kg.

The teams are working in varied climatic conditions with, on the one hand, extremes of heat that make it difficult for the dog teams and, on the other, strong winds and thick dust clouds. Communications have been limited and there is still no network signal in southern Iraq. All e-mails have to be accessed and sent from the CPA internet terminal, which was out of order for prolonged periods in February and March of 2004. However, without doubt, the biggest challenge facing all teams, and inevitably all future reconstruction and aid teams, is the issue of security.

The Security Challenge

Often the problem from the Iraqi community was the misidentification of MTI staff as part of the Coalition Forces. Four main issues/questions were continually asked when the teams arrived in a village: When will the village have electricity, clean water, medication and security from banditry? In some cases, unless an answer was forthcoming on those questions, the local people would refuse to discuss anything else.

As with all its logistical requirements, MTI has successfully managed its own security, independently recruiting and training its

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own armed protection and security services, enabling our teams to work securely and safely across southern Iraq.

To mitigate the security threat, all survey teams were accompanied by a policeman where available and had their own security guard, hired by MTI. However, even this had its uncertainties. These police escorts were adamant they would do nothing if required to respond for fear of retribution on their families. Also, there was initial confusion with regards to the policy on rules of engagement. Although permitted to carry weapons, many policemen were not issued any ammunition due to a ruling by the Coalition Forces.

Because the Missan province ejected the Baath Party prior to the end of the war, there does not seem to be the intensity of anti-Western sentiment that the Coalition reports elsewhere. All security threats to date seem to be from lawlessness and poverty, rather than concerted resistance activities. Having said that, it is still commonplace to hear gunfire, though mostly from local weddings and other celebrations. The local people have been friendly and supportive and MineTech has been accepted into the community.

Differing attitudes and threats in the north and south are the result of both religious feeling and the interaction between the military and the local population. The threat in the south is mainly from banditry and criminal behaviour, with most of the political unrest targeted at the north. However, several of the MTI survey teams were caught up in rioting and stone throwing in Basrah, and a whole team was trapped in the Al

Qurnah Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC) building during another angry protest. Yet, the main problem for MTI has been the hassle with thieves, which is handled by its own security processes.

The security situation that prevailed in Iraq hampered the completion of the Emergency Survey; however, what was achieved under the circumstances made the contract worthwhile and successful. MTI would like to thank all the UN Area Mine Action Coordination Team (AMA-CT) staff for its cooperation and assistance throughout the contract, despite the sometimes difficult security climate that prevailed.

As of the end of February 2004, the teams had destroyed approximately 1,162 tonnes of ammunition, 492,033 items of EO and 33,024 landmines—clearing a total of 4,422,574 sq m of land.

** Photos c/o the authors.*

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