

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 5
Issue 3 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 37

December 2001

Interview with Martin Barber, Chief of United Nations Mine Action Service

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Recommended Citation

Busé, Margaret S. (2001) "Interview with Martin Barber, Chief of United Nations Mine Action Service," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 37.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol5/iss3/37>

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Journal of Mine Action

Wednesday 3rd August 2016

Interview with Martin Barber, Chief of United Nations Mine Action Service

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The United Nations Mine Action Service has a successful program operating in Afghanistan that employs 4000 local Afghans in mine action. Currently, they are mobilizing their efforts to respond to the current refugee situation and the new mine action situation.

by Margaret Busé, *Editor*

Margaret Busé (MB): Can you give a history of how you got started with UNMAS?

Martin Barber (UNMAS): I started my career with the UN working with UNHCR in Thailand and Laos in the early seventies. I worked as director of the British Refugee Council, which is an NGO, for seven years. In 1988, I went to Pakistan to work on the coordination of humanitarian programs in Afghanistan and I stayed there until 1996. In 1995 and 1996 I was the coordinator for Afghanistan for the UN. In 1996, I went to Bosnia for two years as a Deputy Representative of the Secretary General. In 1998 I came to New York to work on policy issues for the Office of Humanitarian Affairs. At the beginning of this year, I became Chief of the United Nations Mine Action Service. My interest in mine action and UNMAS derives from my time in Afghanistan because from the time I arrived it was obvious that the very widespread use of anti-personnel mines in particular, as well as anti-tank mines in Afghanistan was going to be a major problem as far as the return of refugees and for the reconstruction of the country. During the time I was there we developed the first major UN humanitarian program. The program has reached a point where it employs 4000 different Afghans in different levels of mine action.



MB: What were some of the challenges to working mine action in Afghanistan?

UNMAS: The most recent challenge that the program in Afghanistan has been facing has been funding. In 2001 they budgeted a total of 21 million dollars for different mine action activities, the majority of which was set aside for mine clearance operations. Unfortunately, as of the middle of September, we received only half of that total. The result of that, even before the 11th, was that a number of operations had to be suspended for lack of funding, and all of the participants had agreed to take a pay-cut in order to allow the program to continue. While the number of aspects has been suspended during the current phase of activities in Afghanistan, they have developed a revised budget for the last six months, which is looking for a total of 17 million dollars to cover a number of activities.

Over the past, ten years that this program has been going, I would say that the program has been very widely accepted in the country as one which is impartial, humanitarian, and widely respected by ordinary people in Afghanistan in that it clears affected areas, it allows people to go back to their villages, it allows people to restart their activities. It has not faced insuperable political

challenges, because everyone sees it as impartial.

MB: The operating government has been supportive and facilitated your operations there?

UNMAS: I think it would be fair to say that the different governments have been in power in Kabul over the last 10 years, as well as the different movements that have had control over different parts of the country at different times, on the whole, these governments and groups have been positive toward mine action programs, have recognized its value.

MB: What has changed for you, for UNMAS, for MAPA, in the current conflict?

UNMAS: At the level of the work that the mine action organizations need to carry out, the new phase of operations is introducing a new type of munitions into Afghanistan, which has not been seen there before. The program is taking advantage of the current pause in operations to find out more about these new munitions and to train the various operators in how to deal with them. Our impression at this stage is that the munitions that are being used are similar to those that were used by NATO in Kosovo. We have encouraged some cooperation between the Kosovo and Afghanistan program so they can exchange information on how these munitions are being dealt with. It's not really mines that we're talking about; it's UXO being dropped from aircraft. A percentage of that ordnance, depending on where it lands, may not explode. If not properly dealt with by trained people, it can of course cause injuries and death to people who come across them, to people who pick them up, when the fighting is over.

MB: How else are UNMAS and MAPA preparing to go back into Afghanistan?

UNMAS: First, of all there's contingency planning. The entire major mine action components are being replanned to take into account the changes, which will have taken, place. The second is the collection of information about the ordnance that is being used and the location where it is likely to be found. Third, is the preparation of training courses for all components of mine action, including both clearance and mine awareness for the new submunitions. Fourth, is the coordination of operational deployment of all components including mine awareness. In all the major cities, we still have emergency teams available, which are being called out to deal with UXO.

As part of the new training programs, we'll have to produce new training materials; we'll have to produce new mine awareness materials to take into account the new munitions. What is going on is an attempt to identify any UN equipment and materials, which might have been lost in Afghanistan, which would need to be replaced to get the teams operational again. Then the next phase would be to prepare the procurement for replacement materials.

MB: Has there been any donor interest in supporting the projects post-conflict?

UNMAS: Yes. We, and our colleagues in Islamabad, which is the center of the operation, are talking to a number of donors who are interested in the program. We are hopeful for strong support for the program.

MB: Do you expect that you'll be expanding Afghanistan's mine action capabilities, working with other NGO's?

UNMAS: There are already fifteen NGO's operational within the mine action programs in Afghanistan. Nine are Afghan NGO's and six are international. There may be more organizations coming in to provide humanitarian aid or to provide construction service and it'll be very important that our teams work closely with them to prepare them for the environment in which they're going to work, so they're fully aware of the mines and UXO that they may encounter. So, that's going to be a major activity. One of the things we will be doing, we

will be bringing something to international funding. A small number of experts will be in for a short period of time to work with the Afghans to assist them with the new situation, the new munitions that have been used. I would anticipate that that would be a short assignment, and the organizations would be trained and equipped to deal with the situations themselves.

MB: What about the refugees and the mine fields in Pakistan, what will you be doing to organize mine action efforts there?

UNMAS: The key point in relation to the movement of people, whether refugees or internally displaced, is that they are able to keep to well marked lanes or roads, that they're not obliged to cross over remote mountaintops in order to travel through border points that are closed. We would support the efforts of all organizations, which are seeking to have main roads opened to travel, because that is much safer than traffic through unmarked areas with mines or UXO, which would be a danger to those who are traveling. We'll be encouraging to keep routes open, and encouraging groups that are working on mine awareness to prepare the people for the dangers that they may encounter while traveling.

MB: What will UNMAS and MAPA be doing to facilitate the refugee resettlement?

UNMAS: I would say that for the last 10 years when the mine program has been doing clearance operations, priority has always been given to areas to which refugees or displaced peoples wanted to return. As soon as the program becomes aware that groups of refugees or displaced people want to return to a certain area, then, as a matter of priority then resources would be shifted to those areas, first of all to survey and mark the mined areas and then as soon as resources are available to carry out the clearance. It's always been a top priority of the mine action program in Afghanistan to respond to the needs of refugees.

MB: Is there anything else you'd like to say about the program?

UNMAS: The Afghanistan program is unique in the extent that mine clearance is carried out by organizations, managed and owned entirely by Afghans. One of its great strengths is that we have a continuity of managers who have been associated with the program for a long time, and who've really become very skilled in managing these operations. They are highly cost-effective; they've been innovative in the use of new techniques. There is a very widespread use of mine-detecting dogs in the program. Two hundred dogs are available for use in the program, so I think it's an extraordinary program, with a great deal of achievement behind it. Something like 240 km² has been cleared. I think it's one where those donors who have supported the program through the years are well satisfied with how their funds are being used.

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