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Information Requirements for Explosive Remnants of War, the Views of the Clearance Community

Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining

Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD)

GROUP OF GOVERNMENTAL EXPERTS OF THE STATES PARTIES TO THE CONVENTION ON PROHIBITIONS OR RESTRICTIONS ON THE USE OF CERTAIN CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS WHICH MAY BE DEEMED TO BE EXCESSIVELY INJURIOUS OR TO HAVE INDISCRIMINATE EFFECTS

Discussion Paper

Information Requirements for Explosive Remnants of War,
the Views of the Clearance Community

Prepared by the
Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD).

Introduction

Access to relevant information is vital to the establishment and operational effectiveness of any clearance and risk education programme designed to alleviate the effects of explosive remnants of war (ERW). Where that information is available, it can have a direct and almost immediate impact on operations, and helps to ensure that the threat from ERW is dealt with efficiently, mitigating the risk for civilians. However, the type and level of information needed will vary depending on the parties to the conflict, nature of the conflict, and the location of ERW. Information, such as the nature of the munitions used and their aim points, is extremely useful to the organisations involved in post-conflict clearance and risk education operations. This information assists in establishing the size of the operation, identification of the assets required for the problem, training requirements, resource mobilisation, and prioritisation of tasks.

The information required to assist clearance and risk education operations is generally available to most parties to a conflict. The issue is ensuring that accurate information is released in a timely manner and in a useable format. Failure to release the information by the military means that humanitarian organisations have no alternative but to try to find the answers themselves, as the information is essential to the safety and effectiveness of their work. This inevitably has significant resource implications, not just in terms of cost for field surveys, or in the substantial amount of time involved, but potentially also in human lives and limbs that could otherwise have been saved. Where survey work is required because of the lack of information, the risks are raised that an accident will occur within the civilian community; not knowing or not being informed that a munition has been used can lead to important messages not being passed to the local communities leaving them in greater risk.

Supported by the Coordinator for ERW, the GICHD undertook a study on the Information Requirements for ERW.[1] The aim of that report was to inform States Parties of what those currently engaged in clearance and risk education operations believe are their information requirements. This discussion paper summarises the main findings of that report.

[1] Explosive Remnants of War – Information Requirements, published by GICHD, May 2003.

Which information
There are a number of areas in which information could be usefully provided. The GICHD examined three: technical information, geographic information and markings information.

Technical Information
This relates to details about the physical characteristics of munitions: type, fuse method of operation, explosive content, hazards, presence of anti-handling devices.

If there is one element of every munition which the clearance community would like to know about, it is the means of initiation of the munition, whether by a fuze, anti-handling device or self-destruction mechanism. Of these, the single most important piece of information are any details on anti-handling or anti-disturbance devices which munitions may have. Even to know of the existence of these devices on a munition will save lives as it prevents the use of inappropriate clearance procedures. Only marginally less important are the method of operation for a fuze (is it contact, proximity, or timed fuze) and details of any self-destruction mechanism. As one respondent to our research noted:

> "Knowledge of fuzing systems can be very important to the explosive ordnance operator as the fuze is the critical component which determines whether the unexploded ordnance functions or not and some fuzes can prove to be more sensitive than others. Likewise knowledge of anti-handling, anti-disturbance and self destruction incorporated in the fuzing can prove in certain instances to be 'safety critical' especially where charge placement is concerned and when planning to clear an area with munitions which may explode unexpectedly as their self-destruct times elapse."[2]

There has been considerable debate within the Group of Government Experts on ERW about the provision of what are termed "Render Safe Procedures". For the military there is an understandable reluctance to provide technical procedures which allow for fuze diagnostics and removal, and therefore potential exploitation of munitions. However, the clearance community prefers to dispose of munitions via conventional munitions destruction, which involves the destruction of all or part of the munition, usually using an explosive charge, to inert or destroy the munition. Our research show that it is not critical for the clearance community to know the full range of technical options for render safe procedures. This is not to say they are not useful, for example should a large bomb need to be cleared from the middle of a village, or next to a hospital, then destruction may not be possible. But the views of the clearance community show a practical understanding of the issues and it is for States Parties to decide what they can do to ensure flexibility for the disposal techniques of ERW.

Many munition types are standard throughout the world like grenades and mortars. While the established hazards of high explosive and conventional munitions are well known, there is a concern to know about new and unusual hazards which may require the acquisition and use of non-standard equipment, or the development of new operating procedures. The clearance community would like to know about the hazards

[2] Supplementary comments made by Afghan Technical Consultants in their GICHD questionnaire, April 2003.

posed by munitions, such as unusual chemical compositions, fuel-air explosives, high toxicity and recommended danger areas.

The above details are munitions specific, on the broader question of what has been used and how many munitions have been used, the clear preference of the clearance community is to know what has been used. For parties to a conflict this should be a relatively simple task to provide a list of munitions employed. Respondents to the research of the GICHD viewed the quantities of munitions used, broken down by munition types as only useful, and this was a strong preference.

Geographic Information.
This relates to the location of possible ERW, in this instance the aim points for munitions, such as submunitions and artillery rounds.

Geographic information has already been provided to clearance organisations in post-conflict environments, as has happened in Kosovo and Afghanistan and is starting to happen in Iraq. So it is with the benefit of experience that the single most important factor in the provision of geographic information is that of accuracy. Inaccurate information wastes valuable and scarce resources. Accurate information saves time, resources and lives.

Information on Munitions Markings.
This is used in the survey, risk education and clearance components of the programme. Such data helps to correctly identify the threat, enable the right techniques to be employed, and produce and disseminate accurate educational tools to help affect communities.

The impact of information on the markings and visual characteristics of munitions is dependent to some extent on which munitions are used, as already mentioned clearance organisations want to know what has been used. Markings are seen as particularly important for compiling a risk education programmes. While it can be important to know munition markings with unusual and toxic or hazardous contents, for standard munitions this is relatively little variance between nations.

How and When information should be provided.
With regard to the timings by which information is received, the consensus is clearly "as soon as possible", with technical and marking information to be provided in advance and geographic information immediately after the end of the conflict.[3] Several respondents annotated their papers or made supplementary comments that while information must be available quickly they also emphasised the need for accuracy. Information which is not accurate discredits the information source and wastes valuable resources which are deployed to confirm the information only to find no evidence. The programme manager in Kosovo in 1999 comments that "the credibility of the information was affected by glaring inaccuracies, such as survey teams unable to locate any sign of cluster bomb strikes in many areas where they were

[3] For geographic information, the option of receiving information before the end of the conflict was not offered. This decision was made to reflect the realities of the situation, that military forces are generally reluctant to state where they are targeting their munitions while the conflict continues.

reported, as well as strikes located many kilometres from any area supposedly affected." [4]

The form in which information is received depends to some extent on the location and organisational set-up of the clearance programme. While some form of computer-based information management system is the norm, the formats vary[5]. Further, information is required for work in the field, often some distance from the headquarters, where laptop computers may not be practical. Therefore the top two choices were for choices which involved either hard or soft copy or a multiple format involving both. Therefore there is a strong preference to receive information in both hard and soft copy. Should States Parties undertake to provide information, it is critical that standard formats are agreed and used.

As to how the information was passed, the preference was through UNMAS, a mine action centre (MAC) and then via a military liaison officer (MLO). In reality, all three choices function simultaneously usually in the immediate post-conflict phase. It should be noted that other UN organisations including UNDP, UNICEF and UNOPS are also involved in the provision of mine action programmes. However, UNMAS is the UN focal point for clearance activities, and is responsible for coordinating this work when linked to peacekeeping and emergency situations. While preferences were stated, it is perhaps most important that organisations know who will have this information and how they can get hold of it. The optimum solution would probably involve a mix of UN, MAC and MLOs, providing an information point for all organisations.

Feasibility and Impact Statement

Of the information requirements covered in this report, all are readily available to military forces today. If the information is not provided, humanitarian organisations still have to discover the information through the employment of survey techniques in the danger areas. It is not a question of whether this information is available or not, this knowledge is fundamental to the operational safety and efficiency of a clearance programme. Should States Parties provide accurate information, when needed, in a useable form it will have a direct, almost immediate impact on the clearance programme and help alleviate the humanitarian impact of the civilian population at risk.

[4] John Flanagan, *Mitigating the Effects of Cluster Bomb Sub-Munitions*, Paper prepared for Pax Christi Ireland conference on explosive remnants of war, April 2003.

[5] In the majority (85%) of national mine action programmes, the GICHD Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) is used. The remaining national programmes and some non-governmental organisations use a mixture of different systems.