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For a mine-free planet

SAMANTH SUBRAMANIAN

The campaign against landmines has come a long way even as the second UN Mine Action Day falls on April 4.

It was "maybe a decade, certainly years and not many decades," before most existing minefields were cleared, most countries joined the Mine Ban convention, and most landmine producers were driven out of business. A largely mine-free world, Gaylard seemed to imply, was slowly beginning to swim into view.

PHOTOS: UNMAS/SUDAN

PRICE OF A MIS-STEP: Mines are still killing or maiming 15,000 people a year.

IN Maxwell Gaylard's UN offices, on a short cabinet, stands a bronze sculpture, given to him, Gaylard says, by "an American woman with a large heart". A wizened bronze man, with a pair of bronze shears, bends over a little bronze shrub, willing it to grow.

On its base, the sculpture bears the label Roots of Peace. "It's to show what we do, how we make land safe for agriculture and for life."

Optimistic views

Gaylard, director of the Mine Action Service in the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, is optimistic about his work. On April 4 last year, the first ever UN Mine Action Day, he insisted

that the international campaign against landmines had come a long way, and that it was "maybe a decade, certainly years and not many decades," before most existing minefields were cleared, most countries joined the Mine Ban convention, and most landmine producers were driven out of business. A largely mine-free world, Gaylard seemed to imply, was slowly beginning to swim into view.

But a couple of decades, when mines are killing or maiming 15,000 people a year, is still a long time and as with all such marathon campaigns, the last lap will be the hardest to run.

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, points out that 80 countries are still affected to some degree by landmines or unexploded ordnance. At least 40 countries, including major powers like the United States, Russia, China and India, have not signed the Mine Ban Treaty.

Over 160 million mines are stockpiled around the world, ready to be used by rogue regimes and militias that are hungry for inexpensive weaponry.

Ahead of this year's Mine Action Day, Gaylard frames these statistics differently. The current hit rate of 15,000 per year has come down from 25,000 in the late 1990s. "It's true that not every country has signed the Convention," he says, in his genial Australian twang. "But 153 countries have signed — that's pretty good for an international treaty, you know. And even non-signers are more careful, since the Convention acts as a moral force."

Meanwhile, the UN and other organisations tug tirelessly at the sleeves of non-signatories, cajoling and persuading them to join the Convention.

Satnam Jit Singh, a retired Indian ambassador who is now a diplomatic advisor to the ICBL, is one such advocate, with a special knowledge of India's own intransigence.

As a 22-year-old Army engineer during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War, Singh stepped over an undetectable anti-personnel mine during a clearing operation and lost his right leg. "I took the accident in my stride, as a professional hazard," Singh says.

Perhaps there's a whisper of a personal edge to his hectic activity, as he travels ceaselessly on his mission to universalise the Convention.

Real utility

Almost all his arguments to governments, says Singh, revolve around the real utility of landmines.

"A 1996 study established that long-term negative humanitarian consequences of the use of landmines far outweigh short-term military advantages," he says. "Viable non-explosive alternatives that could serve, more or less, the same purpose as landmines are available with all armies." What the world needs is a change in mindset and in defence doctrine. "If 153 countries can defend their borders without the use of landmines, surely the remaining 40 can also do the same."

The other side

Many of the remaining 40, at least in their official stances, beg to differ. The Indian Government has stated that landmines are essential to the country's defence, and many knowing eyes swivel immediately to the border with Pakistan when this position is aired.

In 2002, an estimate of India's antipersonnel mine stockpile put the number between four million and five million; Pakistan, which feels similarly about the border, was thought to have a stockpile of six million.

Even here, though, there is room for optimism. "Over the last couple of years, the Indian Government has shown considerable flexibility and openness to address this issue," says Singh. "India has started attending Convention-related meetings, and has issued a statement to enunciate its position on the issue."

In a distinct twist of irony, the Indian army has also participated in mine-clearing operations in the Congo, Angola, Cambodia, Somalia, Mozambique, Bosnia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. "India's policy is gradually evolving, and it would be great if it could demonstrate leadership and join the Convention soon."

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The hardest part about mine action, therefore, isn't persuading countries to sign on. It is, as Gaylard puts it, "finding the damn things".

Long-lived mines

UNMAS' own role resembles that of an exterminator flushing insects out of a planet-sized apartment — except that many of these insects have been deliberately hidden and can prove murderous if undiscovered. They're long-lived too; European farmers are still encountering, painfully or fatally, active mines that were sown in World War I. The mines are underground and

in rivers, in wells, mountains and forests, in abandoned houses, and on remote roads and they're still being seeded, even if in fewer numbers since the Convention in 1997. Cleaning out the Augean stables had nothing on this.

Chief of Programme Support at UNMAS John Flanagan has been exterminating since 1992, flying in to situations fraught with peril, often with an under-equipped, overworked team, to identify dubious land and de-mine it.

"We're always trying to narrow down the areas as fast as possible, but it's difficult," he says. "While you clear one area, somewhere else people are getting blown up. A lot of what we do, therefore, is risk management." Pressed for time, Flanagan's team finds itself assessing probabilities and playing the odds, releasing all land it doesn't think is mined rather than de-mining everything compulsively. "That's a tough decision to take."

Biggest challenge

Flanagan cites his operations in Kosovo, in the late 1990s, as his biggest professional challenge yet. Over a span of three years, UNMAS destroyed 45,000 devices and cleared over 30 million square metres of land. In the first six months, 8,00,000 refugees crossed back into Kosovo, all eager to return to their homes and their land. Winter loomed, and the Kosovars needed intact houses before the cold set in.

"We were racing against the clock," Flanagan remembers. "Very often, we just marked off minefields and left them, to be de-mined later at leisure. There were booby-trapped houses, and even mines in the gardens." All across Kosovo, with limited staff, the UNMAS team worked to release pastureland and fields.

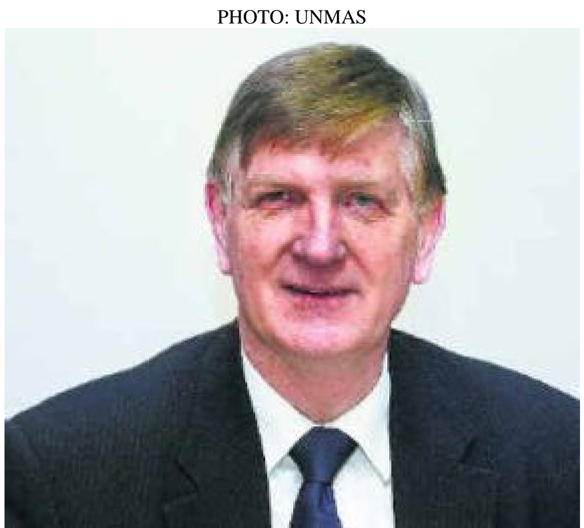
"We sometimes didn't know what the land was being used for," says Flanagan. "So we'd scan the surface and release it. Then, two weeks later, we'd be driving by and see a farmer ploughing it, so we'd have to stop him and clear the land for buried munitions."

Engaged as consultants to evaluate the mission, The Praxis Group, in its report, called the end result of the Kosovo operations "a resounding success".

"There was a level of authority I haven't seen in any other humanitarian field," says Dirk Salomons, who authored the report on behalf of The Praxis Group. "It involved highly qualified people, and the normalisation standards are high and unique."

Finding the mines

PHOTO: UNMAS



Directing operations: Maxwell Gaylard.

Mine action, for instance, no longer involves just solitary posses of men sweeping back and forth with detectors. Today mine data is fed into maps in a computerised system; areas are prioritised by the likelihood that they are mine-affected, and social and economic factors are overlaid. Missions are "tasked" by the specific equipment needed to complete them.

Simultaneously, research by agencies such as the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining and the Mine Action Information Center at James Madison University looks for ways to lighten UNMAS' burden.

No hypothesis is too bizarre; the GICHD, for instance, is examining with great interest a project that uses Gambian pouched rats to sniff out explosive vapours, and UNMAS sees potential in a similar experiment with bees.

"In principle, the mine action campaign doesn't fall short anywhere," says Salomons. "But in reality, where it does fall short is linked to funding. UNMAS makes a valiant effort to market mine action projects. They put out a brochure that is like a Sears catalogue, so that you can just pick what you want to fund. UNMAS knows what to do, and how to do it. It's just a question of money."

In the past, the international community has pulled together in one giant surge to wipe out smallpox and, to a slightly less absolute degree, polio. That seems to be exactly what is needed with landmines today.

A few hectic years of concerted de-mining and generous funding for UNMAS and other agencies could make a world of difference.

As Salomons puts it: "We're at a stage now where clearing up 25 per cent of the mines out there will improve conditions by 75 per cent."

This may never again be an entirely mine-free planet, but enough can still be done to ensure that the price of a misstep isn't a limb or a life.

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