"When Simply Going Home May Kill You..."

Mines in the Rural Community
When Nancy Dupree asked me to make a presentation on the mines issue as the subject for the second ARIC "special event" I confess that my first reaction was to reply with a polite refusal. It is comparatively easy in any aid field to become notorious in the role of devil's advocate and often taking up a negative stance on every issue is an easier path than giving credit where it is due, particularly when UN programmes, a popular target for NGO criticism, are the subject under discussion.

My own, heavily publicised, criticism of the UNOCA mine eradication programmes has become something of a local cause célèbre and people expect me, as a matter of course, to take a contrary stance to UNOCA on every aspect of the programme. I have frankly become tired of this role, especially when so many of the personalities who congratulate me on my "stand" are senior UN figures who do not have the courage to speak out themselves. But I have a great respect for Nancy and know that she, at least, perceives the mines issue as a real human problem rather than a political debating point - for that reason I agreed to talk at ARIC and, for those who may be interested, my notes are attached.

To clarify my position on de-mining activities as they exist at present in Afghanistan:

1. I applaud and support the recent importation of Flail Units and the work of ATC and MCPA in their respective field roles.

2. I believe, however, that these present operations should be seen as pilot programmes, a learning process - the real task of mine eradication in Afghanistan is a huge one which the present Operation Salam organisation is logistically incapable, in its present form, of mounting.

3. Present de-mining achievements can not in any way be seen to have made any difference to the situation facing returning refugees except on a very limited local scale. If the Coordinator was correct two years ago in his assessment that mines were a major factor impeding repatriation he has no grounds to modify that position now.

4. Mine eradication in the Afghan context can only be conducted on strictly humanitarian grounds - the single aim must be to re-establish community confidence in their land. By "land" I mean roads, tracks, agricultural areas, irrigation systems, villages and hillsides. To prioritise airfields for clearance is criminally irresponsible and an indication of how remote UNOCA planners are from the realities of Afghanistan.

5. The present "minimum risk" position of UNOCA, where they establish Afghan implementation agencies which allows them to disclaim responsibility for errors while claiming credit for progress is cynical and morally reprehensible. UNOCA should shoulder full responsibility for all aspects of the programme whether implemented directly or through partner agencies.
6. I believe that mine eradication can only effectively be conducted by an organisation such as the United Nations until such time as Afghanistan has a central government with the will and organisational infrastructure to take over the task. But, if they are to be successful, UNOCA senior officials must show a willingness to accept, and react to, positive criticism.

RAE McGRATH
Peshawar
August 1990
"When simply going home may kill you"........a dramatic title for a lecture - why did I choose it?

Admittedly for its impact - how otherwise could I compete with the daily, glib, talk of mines that has inured this community to the true nature of the misery that many Afghan communities will be forced to face in the coming years. I make no apologies for the obvious interpretation which may be attributed to my choice of title at a time when repatriation is such a controversial issue - the presence of mines in Afghanistan, no matter how inconvenient they may be for repatriation plans, cannot be viewed in isolation. However, that should not be seen as a comment, positive or negative, on recent initiatives to encourage the return of refugees to their villages - it is a statement of fact that must be accepted, not just by UNOCA and UNHCR, but by everyone with a commitment to the future of Afghanistan - most importantly by those Afghans who will form the political and technical strata of a free Afghan society.

Afghanistan's continued existence is dependant on its farmers and fields - fact - the same rural communities which lie devastated by eleven years of war.

I would like, by way of introduction, to tell you a short story, a true story..................
In a small bomb-shattered village in Paktia the hard labour of one man had reached fruition. Leaving his family in the refugee camp he had come home and rebuilt his house, cleared his small area of land and cleaned the dewy that brought water to it.

Now there was a crop in the field and the man, sifting the good earth through his fingers in the manner of farmers everywhere, had time for reflection. The Soviets, who drove him from the land were defeated, the valley was peaceful and, though life was not yet normal, there were good signs. A Committee from Peshawar had rebuilt the bridge on the river, the bazaar grew every day - trading was brisk. Every week saw the return of old familiar faces and the talk as the men drank their chai was of the future.

It was time to send for his young family from Pakistan.

The excitement of the homecoming was shortlived.

On the second day the man's daughter, only three years old, was blown to pieces as she played in the small garden beside the house.

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Why, you may say, choose this sad story from the million sad stories that document a nation at war for so many years?

My answer is that this story is an introduction to a new war, a war which has no combatants, only victims. A war which has no generals, no battle plans or victories - only losers. The enemy has no political ideology because its army has no soldiers.

The strength of the enemy lies in its stealth, it is a hidden enemy - the ultimate fifth column.

Faceless and mechanical its regiments consist only of explosives. TNT, Composition B, Tetryl - chemical formulae which kill and maim indiscriminately and recognise no armistice. It is an army of landmines.

You have all heard the figures - five, ten, twenty, even fifty millions - estimates arrived at, originally, for propaganda purposes but conveniently transposed to the humanitarian field.

And what does it all mean to you - here in Peshawar - or Islamabad, Geneva, London, New York? We are the nuclear generation - we have refined the art of genocide, packaged it neatly - we even talk of "clean" and "dirty" nuclear devices. How can we be expected to understand the effects on one simple farming family, tucked away in a remote valley of Afghanistan, of a mere 240 grams of TNT?

Let us try, for a short time, to focus our minds on the effects of mines - not the technical aspects, but the real human cost of applying as little as 0.23kg of pressure on the wrong piece of ground in rural Afghanistan today.

SLIDES

Sickening, inhumane pictures that make us angry.

And if I stop this lecture at this point those visions may stay with you for hours - and then, because you have important work to do, the vision will fade, became just another sad memory to live with.
I would like to share with you, what I feel, is a more potent testimony to the horror of mines - the words of children who have survived - simple, apolitical statements of terrifying and life shattering moments - told in the matter-of-fact way that only children can re-live such events.

And I make no apologies for using children to make a point - children are the future of Afghanistan.

1. Fazal is eight years old, on the eleventh of Ramazan this year he sustained severe mine shrapnel injuries to his legs, arms, trunk and face. This is his story:

"My father sent me with my sister to bring our animals because the planes were bombing. Some (of the animals) were a long way away. My sister said we must hurry, other children were getting their animals too.

We were chasing the animals together and then my sister...I thought she fell, but there was fire and I got hurt. Our animals ran away but I could not chase them and I had blood on me and was hurting a lot. I cried for my sister but she did not answer me. Then my father came running, he was crying too, but when he lifted me it hurt very bad and he put me down - he was looking at me, I wanted him to carry me but it hurt. Then two men put me on a sack and carried me to the village. My father carried my sister and I did not see her again, she was dead.

My father brought my mother and little brothers to a camp while I was in hospital. All the animals have gone and we must stay here." ~

2. Mohammed is ten or eleven years old, he is not sure. A shepherd, he sustained superficial injuries in a mine incident in 1987.

"I am the head of the family now, my father and brother were martyred. We were in a pick-up, my father was in the cab, I was sat in the back with my elder brother and some other men.

I think the driver went the wrong way because the men were shouting at him, they were angry. The driver put the car backwards but it stuck at the side of the road and we got out of the back to push it. Then there was an explosion.

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1 Interview MAG/C004/7/90
I was thrown away and my eyes hurt, it was hard to see, someone was shouting but I did not understand. Then my father came and picked me up, he was bleeding but my brother was hurt in the field. My father ran into the field to help my brother and there was another explosion. I wanted to go to him but another man stopped me and said there were mines.

They pulled my brother onto the road but my father was dead. Then my brother died too."

3. Sayed is thirteen. He lost his left leg above the knee in a mine incident late last year. His right foot is seriously deformed.

"I was carrying food to a muhahideen post near my village. My friend who is a smaller boy was with me. Coming back after taking the food we were walking by the river when there was an explosion. I was very confused and had fallen down. I stood up and then fell down again, I kept trying to stand up, there was smoke and dust and my friend was crying and running. I couldn't understand, I tried to stand up and started shouting.

My friend brought my father and he lifted me onto his back and carried me to the village. At the village he put me on a donkey and took me to the muhahideen clinic.

I was frightened but the pain was not bad then. Later it was bad. I did not know my leg was gone, I really didn't know it was a serious injury"
This is the war being fought in rural Afghanistan - this is the reality to which many refugees must return.

A farmer has the same basic requirements in Afghanistan as farmers everywhere:

1. He requires shelter for himself and his family.

   This, in most cases, means rebuilding his house. But many villages are mined.

2. He must have roads and tracks to transport his surplus produce to the bazaar.

   The roads and tracks and their shoulders and verges are heavily mined in many areas.

3. He requires water to irrigate his fields.

   In most cases, this means repair and cleaning of deweys and karez systems. Surface canals were heavily mined by Soviet and regime forces and the saturation mining of hillsides denies access to many karezes.

4. He requires land on which to plant his crops and graze livestock.

   Wide areas of arable and grazing land are mined or just as effectively believed to be mined.

These are merely the basic farming priorities - consider also that a family needs firewood, the collection of which eventually forces women and children to stray onto new ground - all too often that ground will be mined. Afghan children are as playful and curious as children everywhere - for many children their games will prove deadly and their curiosity fatal.

I have heard people, some of them experienced relief workers whose opinion on other matters I respect, say that "they think the mines situation is exaggerated - not as big a problem as was originally thought" that is a comforting thought, particularly if, when pronouncing such arrogant opinions, you know that you will never be called upon to put them to the test with your own life as the stake.
Mine eradication must not be isolated from reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and, in many areas, must be a precursor to repatriation no matter what the cost to the international community.

Political considerations, Afghan or otherwise, are not worth the life of one farmer when the future of Afghanistan, no matter what the eventual outcome of the war, lies with the farming community. The continued presence of mines will ravage that community.

I have, in the past, been critical of the Operation Salam Mine Eradication effort - I make no apologies, UNOCA is accountable to the donors, our governments, for their effective use of funding and United Nations officials, no matter how titled or respected, have a responsibility to the member nations - that means us!

However, their programme is improving, with the introduction of mechanisation and specialist civilian staff and I am the first to applaud these advances. But these are only the first steps - there is a need to streamline these pilot operations and make field decisions at field level, to base the programme on humanitarian priorities tempered by technical considerations. Logistic support must be drastically improved - it is little use having specialist teams who cannot deploy because of a shortage of suitable vehicles.

Most of all there is need for long-term planning based, not on wild estimates of millions of mines, but on quality information. Afghan organisations and NGO's must be prepared to act as conduits for this vital information. The task is a difficult one, probably the most complex mine-clearance operation ever mounted, but it is a feasible logistic task and central to Afghanistan's future.

At the end of my interview with one twelve year old boy who had lost his leg and his family I asked him a question often asked of children in my country,

"What are your dreams for the future?"

His answer would be understood by farmers in any part of the world:

"Why do I need dreams? I have two jeribs to farm"

We owe him, and others like him, the security to do that.