

Humanitarian Demining - Making the Lands Safe



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A tragedy of any modern conflict is not limited to the fact that technological novelties sadly armed humankind with tools enabling them to kill many people in a very short time. The gravest thing here is that collision of armed forces nowadays leaves huge territories contaminated with unexploded shells, bombs, abandoned or forgotten mines – all things designed to kill and, unfortunately still, able to kill people decades after the end of conflict. This is a tragic experience of many countries, for example, Croatia that still has to continue its mine clearance program after violent events of the 90-ies. And this is also a well-known experience for Ukrainians, who are still encountering deadly remnants from past century wars and, regrettably, have to rediscover wider dimensions of this terrible truth in view of what is going on in the eastern part of the country.

International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action is a good occasion for a periodic review of the situation here. Unfortunately, our colleagues from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission are continuing to document the sad figures of civilian casualties from mines in Donbas, with 48 civilian casualties in 2019, including 10

children ([see a joint statement on the occasion](#)) They are a said reminder, that more efforts are needed to ensure safety of locals even in the areas, where fighting ceased long ago. It is also worth realizing the scale of the problem. Since 2014, according to information that was gathered at the meetings of UN Mine Action Cluster this spring, over 460,000 explosive objects were found and disposed of in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. For now, Ministry of Defense suspects a stripe of 7,000 km² along the Contact Line of government-controlled area of being contaminated, and another 14,000 km² will have to be checked at the other side. Beyond this area at the government-controlled parts of Donbas, mine action operators by conducting non-technical survey managed to narrow the need for clearance to 21 km² of land, which is still a significant area. It all clearly demonstrates, these efforts need to be coordinated and systemic, with resources used with maximum efficiency.

More than a year ago, a Law on Mine Action was adopted by the Parliament of Ukraine with an intention to create a framework for such a comprehensive approach. In addition, starting from 1 April last year, a 185-pages document named “National Standard: mine action, process management” (Національні стандарти протимінної діяльності (ДСТУ-П 8820) effectively became part of Ukraine’s system of service standards. The OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine and many other members of international community has been actively supporting the process of creation of this legal framework, including by introducing policy makers to foreign experiences and best practices.

To illustrate the importance of co-ordination and standardised approach, let us just name, who is working in mine action in Ukraine now. There are the following state agents – Ministry of Defense, including State Special Transportation Service, State Emergency Service, National Guard of Ukraine and even the Security Service of Ukraine has demining detachments. There are even non-state players who came to help Ukrainians to address the consequences of the conflict – Danish Demining Group (DDG), Fondation Suisse de Déminage (FSD), Halo Trust, as well as Ukrainian demining company “Demining Solutions”. All these organizations have a different history of establishing practices of work with explosive items and have their own internal procedures developed in accordance with the international mine action standards. The outcome of their work will have a direct impact on the safety of Ukrainian citizens thus comprehensive national standards that reflect country specificities and needs of end users of land are necessary.

Let us have a look at a situation from a “customer” perspective, e.g. a farmer in a conflict-affected community. Some military actions were underway at his or her field in the past, and for this farmer it is extremely important to know that there are no unexploded shells or mines, that it is safe to plant and gather crops. Or consider needs of a head of local village who wants to be sure, that children going to school through a nearby forest do not encounter any unexploded remnants of war that can cause injury or death, that the suspected land is properly marked with warning signs and children are educated how to correctly behave in mine affected communities. In other words for

civilian authorities, businesses or ordinary people living in an area of post-conflict rehabilitation, it would be very important to have some assurances that whoever did the job of surveying, marking and clearing their lands, finding all the dangerous items and destroying them, this was done in line with good practices and there is someone responsible for controlling those practices.

On the other hand, for a Head of a demining service in one of the state agencies, it is a nightmare just to imagine that anything happens to any of the people doing such a delicate and really dangerous job. Clearly, a better safeguard here will ensure that personnel is working in line with standard procedures, for example, establishing a clear demand – deminers should be working with distance between each of them at least 25 meters to minimize risks, and they are using metal detectors that are checked for correct functioning every day - before operations begin. It is also a matter of professional pride and responsibility to know, that with due application of standards, your agency did all things possible to exclude mistakes and possible future accidents for people in the area.

Also non-state actors benefit from national standards of operations. Take an operator that campaigned to gather money for humanitarian demining in Ukraine, and did its job to help several villages to get rid of mine threats. But now this operator needs to report to its donors for money spent well, and without national standards of operations no state agency will ever even start checking if anything was done at all. Another aspect of it, if you are a donor that wants to support a good cause of mine action, you need to know that your investment complies with national and international regulations.

So for all of that, the National Mine Action Standards are available now, and ideally the happy picture should be the following. A mine agency (a state one or a non-governmental actor) is doing survey and clearance of land in line with standard procedures, that envisage safety measures for personnel, marks areas with discovered explosive ordnance. Same agency is doing clearance and destruction of discovered items, again with due precautions, for example ensuring that civilians are present no closer than prescribed safety distance. All the operations conducted are timely documented and relevant information is uploaded to Information Management System for Mine Action – Ukrainian version of mine action database– so other agencies have full picture of what was going on in this specific area. There is a quality control exercise, a designated by the law agency checks if all standards of operation are met. A happy farmer or a community leader get a quality control certificate that serves as a guarantee document, as well as a reference for him or her, informing what areas were examined and cleared in accordance with national mine action standards, and who is responsible for quality of operations.

Last year, first communities of Donbas received such safety certificates for 194 hectares of suspected and mined land at 28 locations, confirming their lands were checked and cleared by international operators, the Halo Trust and FSD . The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense performed quality controls and issued documents confirming all the necessary standards were met. This gives hope that the system becomes operational and will be

expanded further. However, the Mine Action Centre whose creation was envisaged by the adopted law is not yet established. There is an expectation that this entity ensures that work of all mine action actors is coordinated, and for example, that all of them are following the agreed standards. For now, some actors treat them just as a piece of advice, but not necessarily a guideline to follow. This also adds uncertainty to procedures for quality control and land handover that are for now rather an ad hoc endeavor.

There is an ongoing process in the Parliament to review and amend the Law on Mine Action, and hopefully a workable framework will be created. With that, Ukraine will receive indeed an operational system of humanitarian demining, where the focus of importance is not on how many explosive objects you found and destroyed, but rather on the size of the area that was contaminated but is now safe for people to live in.