

The Screening of IDPs, Demining and Resettlement in the Vanni

Guy Rhodes, PhD and Matthew Todd

The military successes of the GoSL forces against the LTTE promises to open a new era of development opportunities in the Vanni - and indeed for the north of Sri Lanka as a whole. Although military operations continue and lasting stability in the country requires a political solution to the civil conflict, the management of the return of 'recent' IDPs and their resettlement poses a formidable challenge for the security forces, GoSL, UN, INGO's and the IDPs themselves. In this article Guy Rhodes and Matthew Todd discuss the resettlement process – focusing particularly on the approach to mine action in order to facilitate resettlement with minimal delay.



▪ ***IDP Screening and the Resettlement Imperative***

Plans to resettle IDPs in phases throughout 2009 and 2010 are tentatively underway though there may be appreciable delays in some areas where military operations continue and security concerns relating to larger areas of geography remain. In the aftermath of the military campaign in Mullaitivu, security forces are likely to continue operations to pin-down small pockets of LTTE cadre who may be scattered in the Vanni and identify and neutralise caches of arms and ammunition that remain. Furthermore, landmine and Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) assessments will be necessary in areas where fighting has been particularly intense or where former bases and defensive positions were established.

Despite the challenges, it is important that, as soon as possible, civilians are able to return to normal life since the longer term security and sociological implications of containing tens of thousands of IDPs as 'inmates' in camps are considerable. There are two possible ways for this to happen:

- a) Resettlement in their places of origin;
- b) Relocation elsewhere in Sri Lanka.

While durable solutions from UNHCR and others have typically focussed on option (a), we should however not disregard option (b). All of these people are citizens of Sri Lanka, and therefore have the Constitutional Right to freedom from arbitrary detention (Article 13) and the freedom of movement and to choose his/her residence in Sri Lanka (Article 14); therefore, if there are any of them who would choose voluntarily to live anywhere else in Sri Lanka (and have the means), provided they have passed through the appropriate security screening process, they should be free to do so.

Early resettlement of remaining civilians in their place of origin must remain the principal objective. "The devil makes work for idle hands" is a phrase in English which we don't want to see played out in transit camps or welfare villages in Sri Lanka. People should be engaged as soon as possible in meaningful employment, including the trades they have already mastered such as those that support the cultivation of land and the harvesting of the seas. Retraining or further vocational instruction of IDPs in a camp environment as "something for people to do" is no substitute to the re-establishment and support of livelihoods back in their original

communities. Indeed the need to return vast expanses of agricultural land in the Vanni to productive use is particularly pertinent.

It is this type of assistance and the strengthening of community infrastructure back in the Vanni that the international community are enthused at supporting – not facilitating the establishment of long-term camps that confine IDPs and where the promotion of "devil work" in the form of liquor and domestic violence occur, and the nurturing of long term instability through political subterfuge, continued indoctrination and LTTE propaganda within a camp environment take place. Long-term employment possibilities and investment in communities with a clear future that benefit the development of the Sri Lanka as a whole remain priorities.

'Unfortunately, demining activities operate on a timeframe that cannot keep pace with resettlement and rehabilitation demands. But with careful management of 'risk' returnees can be relocated into areas of low risk - while demining activities can take place in areas of high contamination.'

Security risks associated with some returnees contributing to renewed armed insurgency will remain and it is probable that security forces will want to put in place a military presence and establish mechanisms in the Vanni to minimise such risks. These risks should not deter the process of re-population of communities in the Vanni however – an activity that is more likely to win hearts and minds and benefit long term stability in Sri Lanka, than following a path of incarceration of the country's northern communities in camps. Statements by the GoSL to resettle the north in phases: first, Mannar and northern Vavuniya, followed by Jaffna, Kilinochchi and finally Mullaitivu (when conditions allow) should thus be

pursued, developed and realised. This is not only a humanitarian imperative and appropriate in view of the challenges for Sri Lanka - it would also relieve pressure on financing and the management burden of large scale unsustainable welfare villages and transit camps.

There will be a need to accommodate thousands of IDPs in semi permanent camps to address security considerations of a few, and for those IDPs originating from areas such as Mullaitivu where conditions for return are many months away. However, this must be balanced by a substantial resettlement process in other areas more conducive to receive returnees. And communities such as those in Musalai Division, Mannar District (where civilians were displaced in September 2007 and have been in camps for more than 12 months) should be prioritised for resettlement without delay¹.

▪ ***Understanding Risk and Demining Requirements***

Civilians should not be encouraged to return to areas that are not safe. However, the issue of safety and risk must be put into context - particularly with regard to the threat posed by landmines and UXO which are often overstated. This is a very difficult subject to approach and debate however, as an observation fatalities from snakebites have always dwarfed statistics of those occurring as a result of Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) in Sri Lanka². Furthermore, suicide numbers in Sri Lanka³ exceed fatalities due to snakes, and victims from road accidents are a full order of magnitude higher yet. The need as expressed by some to demine all communities in the Vanni as a prerequisite to the resettlement process is misleading and may be a convenient diversion to 'buy time' in order to address, or facilitate, other security concerns or agendas. Rural communities are exposed to an array of daily risks. The consequences of war provide a further risk from landmines and UXO and indeed a whole generation has already grown up in the Vanni exposed to such risk. As a consequence of a recent phase of conflict however, the risk from ERW has increased appreciably - but mortality figures are unlikely to approach the combined numbers of people that succumb to snake bites when returning to cultivate land and those that choose to take their own lives due to misery and trauma.

¹ A significant caseload of those displaced from earlier phases of conflict, such as Muslims displaced from Mannar and Jaffna in October 1990 should not be forgotten and when appropriate they should be provided with solutions in the context of new opportunities for development in the north

² More people die of snakebite in Sri Lanka than in any other comparable area. An average of 800 people are killed by snakes every year on the 656,120Km² island - equivalent to one person every 82Km² annually

³ Sri Lanka has the highest suicide rate in the world - 55 suicides per 100,000 population according to the Census and Statistics Department

Civilians will be exposed to extreme risk from landmines and UXO in some villages however the majority of communities in the Vanni will not require deployment of dedicated clearance teams. The challenge is to differentiate communities that are free of ordnance, or considered low risk, from those that require contamination to be neutralised through more focused marking or clearance activities. The urgency to undertake this activity and to manage the risk - thus facilitating plans for resettlement cannot be over emphasised. Such an approach creates heated debate and may necessitate a review of the current clearance certification procedures. The issue of 'land release' however is a necessary process and currently a hot topic in mine action globally⁴. It remains particularly applicable to addressing the challenges faced by the Vanni situation.



Landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) from earlier periods of conflict in the Vanni

Sri Lanka benefits from an established authority, the Nation Mine Action Steering Committee (NMASC) operating under the Ministry of Nation Building and Estate Infrastructure Development. This authority oversees planning and coordination of the mine action sector in the country.

It is critical at this early stage in the planning process for the north, that careful management of mine action strategies occur and that adequate coordination and integration of resettlement and longer-term development actors in the planning process is promoted. Improved collaboration between appropriate authorities at a central and district level within the Government - and supported by international efforts and funding - will promote the most effective targeting of mine action resources in the Vanni.

▪ ***Nature of the Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) in the Vanni***

The extent of landmine use over the last 2-3years may not be as prevalent as some may presume. Contamination over this period across the Vanni is more likely to be characterised by the presence of UXO in the form of rockets, artillery shells, mortars and grenades from ground battles. Additional UXO resulting from aircraft strikes, and to a lesser extent naval bombardment (in coastal areas), targeting suspected LTTE infrastructure and strategic positions will also contribute marginally to the overall threat from ERW. Mines are likely to be concentrated around major defensive lines, for example the former Forward Defence Lines on the Jaffna peninsula and around some strategic military bases or installations. The use of mines by the SLA will have been restricted, if at all, compared to earlier periods of conflict and it is likely that away from highly contested areas of land and some segments of the former FDLs (where extensive minefields are reportedly laid), the LTTE may have used them selectively. It is probable that due to diminishing LTTE resources - and where time allowed - mines may have been lifted as LTTE cadres retreated in order to redeploy them elsewhere. According to the SLA, there is also a prevalence of Improvised Explosive Devices⁵ (IEDs) assembled by the LTTE.

The residual contamination of mines and UXO from previous phases of the conflict in Sri Lanka (pre 2002 ceasefire) can not be ignored. Indeed, in several areas of the Vanni, contamination from earlier eras of fighting will pose the predominant threat. The recent spate of hostilities has simply superimposed further contamination onto an existing record of contamination from these earlier episodes of conflict.

⁴ <http://www.gichd.org/operational-assistance-research/land-release/overview/>

⁵ Booby traps typically comprised of military explosives, such as an artillery round, attached to a detonating mechanism

'In areas devoid of a civilian population, the success of such a survey relies on effective collaboration with the military.'

In general, landmines tend to be laid in organised belts for defensive purposes. The nature and extent of UXO contamination however, although predictable (i.e. where intensive ground battles or bombardments occurred), is not so easily delineated and presents different challenges to describe and ultimately clear.

UXO are typically scattered over large areas and may or may not 'block' land for productive use – the degree of 'blockage' dependant on the density of contamination, type and condition of the ordnance. Broadly, UXO do not possess the same risk to injury as landmines⁶ and are often easier to locate and clear through Battle Area Clearance techniques as opposed to more laborious demining procedures. IEDs however, particularly sophisticated varieties, pose a very real threat and may require a relatively high level of technical expertise to neutralise.

▪ **Overview of likely Mine Action Activities**

At the time of writing the Government of Sri Lanka has approved mine survey and clearance work in 15 villages in Musali, Mannar, as well as the Madhu region, the A-35 highway along the north-western coast of Sri Lanka, and the Mannar Rice Bowl area consisting of 70,000,000 sq. meters of highly fertile agricultural land. UNDP and the demining operators are preparing to scale-up operations to meet the urgent demands of this surge in mine action work.

Survey – Demining activities typically operate on a timeframe that cannot keep pace with resettlement and rehabilitation demands. The initial priority therefore is to undertake a rapid assessment of the UXO and landmine problem in order to obtain data to 'manage' the associated risks and facilitate resettlement activities into areas of low risk while demining activities can take place as a parallel process in areas of high contamination. This can be achieved by conducting a *General Survey* – probably in stages, assigning communities to different mine action agencies, or the SLA - as security permits and where priority areas for resettlement are identified⁷. More technical surveys and clearance can be undertaken as concurrent or follow up activities to General Survey activities as required – perhaps more in an integrated fashion.

The established mine action programme in Sri Lanka provides an invaluable platform for this activity. A Geographic Information System (GIS) and mine action database already exists⁸ and stores records of mine/UXO 'danger areas' from earlier periods of conflict and any subsequent clearance activities. The challenge now is to survey and map the new layer of contamination and to incorporate this within the existing database (currently valid to August 2006).

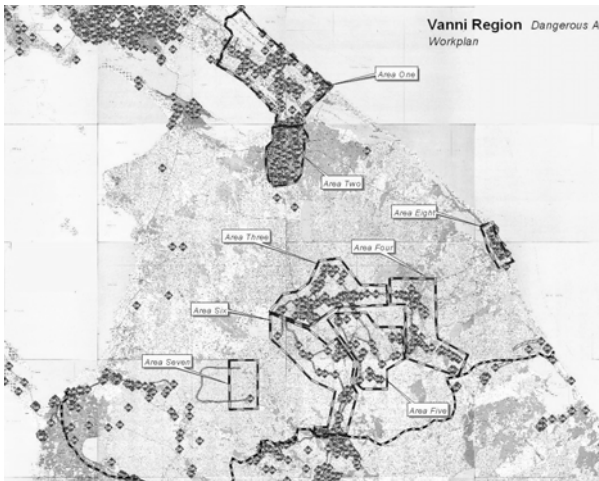
In areas devoid of a civilian population, the success of such a survey relies on effective collaboration and input from the military. Initial activities should focus on a 'desk top' exercise consolidating all existing and expected contamination. This should be undertaken without delay through a process known as 'Expert Opinion Collection (EOC)' which draws on knowledge of key civilian and military persons to provide a tentative framework of expected areas of contamination - and to identify areas where little or no contamination is anticipated. Traditionally, mine action agencies concentrate efforts on locations where mines/UXO exist in high concentrations but in the context of the north of Sri Lanka (at least initially) it is imperative to also identify communities free from contamination (or at low risk). This is vital to support a resettlement process which does not have to wait for extensive clearance activities to be undertaken.

The EOC desk top exercise is not a definitive process – it is an initial tool for appreciating resettlement risk and as a 'pre-survey' activity to be used as guidance for much more important field surveys and assessments. Further information on the presence of landmines and UXO will also inevitably arise after IDPs have returned to communities and human activities resume. As new threats are identified, the IMSMA database will require updating, and plans and priorities for mine action should be reviewed and adjusted accordingly.

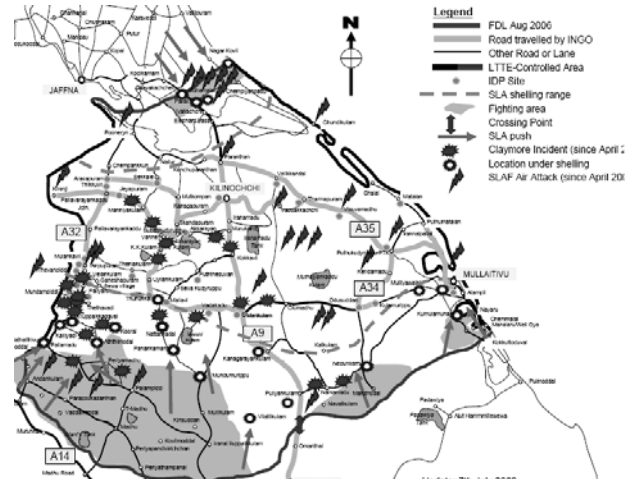
⁶ The is a considerable generalization

⁷ Musali villages already assigned to 3 demining organizations: FSD, MAG and Sarvatra

⁸ Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA)



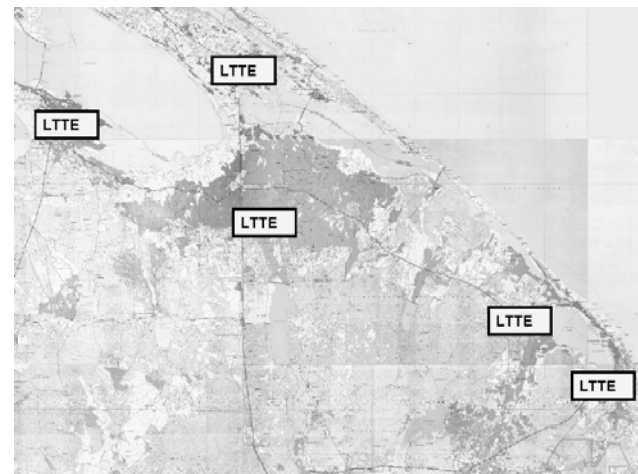
Map providing an indication of mined areas at start of ceasefire from UNDP Mine Action Office (now updated to Aug 2006)



Archive information from developing conflict that may indicate areas of potential contamination: battle areas, lines of defence



Satellite Imagery (Musalai, Mannar)



Areas around known LTTE bases and other positions

Examples of reference material that may assist an initial 'desk top' survey undertaken with the MOD which consolidates knowledge of likely areas of mine and UXO contamination

Mine/UXO Mine Risk Education (MRE) – Returnees should receive mine/UXO risk education. This should not be an 'off the shelf' awareness syllabus - but have content that is tailor made to the risks and context of the Vanni. It should thus reflect the nature of the contamination and build on the experience that many of the civilians already have from growing up in an area marked by remnants of war. Initial MRE may be undertaken in transit camps ahead of any resettlement. An additional feature of returnee instruction should be an understanding of the action required and mechanisms for the reporting of mine and UXO if and when they are encountered.

Marking, Demining and UXO Clearance Activities - Technical surveys and clearance activities will be undertaken by the military and various mine action agencies. Priority setting should focus on the support of resettlement plans including the rehabilitation of community infrastructure and safe re-establishment of livelihood activities.

Clearance approaches and verification methods will include standard demining and Battle Area Clearance (BAC) techniques utilising manual and mechanical capacities. In addition, to larger scale operations, a provision for responding more rapidly to reports from returnees (see MRE paragraph above) should be available where mobile units are deployable to assess, mark and potentially neutralise any small scale threat that can be safely addressed.

Furthermore, clearance activities do not need to wait for the General Survey to be completed as some priorities can be readily identified immediately and clearance undertaken simultaneously. Resettlement to areas in close proximity to identified contamination also should not be immediately rejected and could occur if careful management of the risk is considered – including

adequate MRE for returnees, and where appropriate, marking of potential danger areas to temporarily 'contain the problem'. Risks associated with this type of resettlement may require more debate - however one should perhaps reflect on the period 2002-2005 in the Vanni where extensive clearance of landmines was conducted in and around communities while the populace were *in situ*. Further lessons learnt may be gleaned from 1995/6 when around 500,000 civilians returned to areas with a high degree of contamination in Jaffna following liberation of the peninsula by Government forces.

During much of the ceasefire period extensive clearance was undertaken in the north of the country by SLA (in government controlled areas) and a number of mine action agencies coordinated by the NSCMA. These included NPA⁹, DDG, HALO Trust, FSD, MAG, Horizon, MMIPE and Sarvatra. Those organisations operating within the Vanni typically supported the HDU which was a subsidiary of the TRO and had a capacity that in its zenith consisted of an umbrella of 1000 staff. This was a very successful platform and was fully endorsed during this period by the GoSL and supported by the UN. It is vital to re-establish an appropriate mine action office and coordination centre in the north that benefits from the major alteration to the balance of power in the Vanni and facilitates approved mine action activities authorised by a centralised authority.

- **Funding of Mine Action Coordination and Capacities**

There is an urgent need to ramp up the support and funding of Mine Action actors in Sri Lanka including Government, Military, INGO, and UNDP capacities. The deterioration of the security situation in the North of Sri Lanka from 2005 saw the demise of a substantial platform for mine action (including the withdrawal of NPA which was a leading demining organisation in the Vanni). It is apparent that large scale investment into this sector is required to address the task ahead and should not be delayed as required timelines to realise capacity expansion can be appreciable.

A strengthening of the management structure and the partnership between international mine action groups, the government and particularly the military is critical. This may require a reorganisation of the mine action sector and strengthening of the existing framework of the NSCMA and regional offices. Whatever the arrangement, it must be one that the government clearly support and where coordination and planning with the donors and the broader actors involved with resettlement and development is promoted. The international community has been strong advocates of the resettlement of IDPs in the Vanni and have thus only committed to emergency support in Vavuniya IDP camps. It is therefore essential that clearance is expedited to allow resettlement and that it is done so with necessary leadership and support.

Dr Guy Rhodes is currently the Representative of the Solidar INGO Consortium but has 12 years of previous experience in the surveying of landmines and the facilitation of resettlement and development activities in the aftermath of conflict. He has managed several demining programmes and national surveys - including development of mine action strategies: Mozambique (1993/4), Angola (1996-9), Thailand Borders (2000/1) and Vietnam (2001-4). He has also acted as a mine action consultant to the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), the Washington based Survey Action Centre (SAC) and the UNDP - Yemen (2000), Angola (2002) and Laos (2004).

Matthew Todd, ASB Country Director has 11 years of experience in humanitarian and development work in Sri Lanka. After completing a VSO placement he joined UNDP/UNOPS to work on the development of the Information Management System for Mine Action in the Jaffna Rehabilitation and Resettlement Programme in 2000. He subsequently transferred to the UN Resident Co-ordinator's Office, before rejoining UNDP when the Mine Action program was recommenced following the 2002 ceasefire, and worked the database manager until becoming an independent consultant in 2004.

Neither of the authors are currently involved in the mine action sector in Sri Lanka. This article has been written for a broad range of development actors and donors to better understand the likely mine action processes and planning ahead of IDP resettlement in the Vanni.

⁹ Norwegian Peoples Aid (NPA); Danish Demining Group (DDG), Fondation Suisse de Deminage (FSD), Mines Advisory Group (MAG), Milinda Moragoda Institute of People's Empowerment (MMIPE), Humanitarian Demining Unit (HDU) and Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO)