

Humanitarian Mine Action in Peace-building: The Dangers in the Politicization of Aid Work

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Acronyms:

ANAMA: Azerbaijan's National Agency for Mine Action

CMAC: Cambodian Mine Action Centre

DDR: Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegrate

ELN: National Liberation Army

FARC: The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

HMA: Humanitarian Mine Action

IDP: Internally Displaced Person

MAG: Mine Action Group

UNAMIC: United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia

Abstract

Due to the prevalence of landmines and landmine casualties in nations, demining efforts have expanded drastically in the years since the Mine Ban Treaty. As mine action is used as a tool to build stability and development in the goals of broader peace, it is taken for granted that any mine action efforts will contribute positively towards the peace-building efforts of a state. This paper sets out to examine the specificities of how humanitarian mine action contributes to peace-building efforts in post-conflict societies and societies experiencing violence, as well as what conditions corrupt or encourage peace-building through humanitarian mine action. To do this, I will conduct case-study analyses of Cambodia, Colombia, and Azerbaijan and apply the research found to broader analyses on the merit of humanitarian aid as a whole. Through these cases, I will demonstrate both the value of humanitarian mine action as a peace-building mechanism, as well as the limitations of mine action when used to exercise nations' political motives.

Introduction

Following years of tedious work and intensive collaborative efforts between NGOs, national governments, and international institutions, activists celebrated across the world when the Mine Ban Treaty took effect in 1997. The largest disarmament in history, there had never before been a ban entirely on a particular form of weaponry. With over 80% of countries having signed, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines was able to appreciate the culmination of their efforts in such a pillar agreement in disarmament. Quickly, though, the ICBL decided it was not done, and instead served to advocate for humanitarian mine action (HMA) to occur across the globe.¹ Humanitarian mine action, which is done for the aim of resettling civilians to the land, rather than for military purposes, has since been conducted widely as a method of aid consistently and effectively. With over 150,000 landmines cleared every year since 2009, there is continued global effort to rid the world of landmines, due to their indiscriminate nature and their negative impacts on civilians for decades after conflict ends.²

The demining process is often relied upon by governments as a method of peacemaking, either post-conflict or during protracted conflicts in times of cease-fire.³ It is a key feature of foreign policy for these nations, including the United States and Russia. With this, these nations

¹Jody Williams, Stephen Goose, and Mary Warehame, *Banning Landmines: Disarmament, Citizen Diplomacy* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008)

² Mine Action Review, “Clearing the Mines,” (The Fourteenth Meeting of State Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, 2015), 5; Mine Action Review, “Clearing the Mines,” (The Fifteenth Meeting of State Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, 2016), 5; Mine Action Review, “Clearing the Mines,” (The Sixteenth Meeting of State Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, 2017), 5; Mine Action Review, “Clearing the Mines,” (The Seventeenth Meeting of State Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, 2018), 5;; Mine Action Review, “Clearing the Mines,” (The Eighteenth Meeting of State Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, 2020), 5; Mine Action Review, “Clearing the Mines,” (The Nineteenth Meeting of State Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, 2021), 5; Mine Action Review, “Clearing the Mines,” (The Twentieth Meeting of State Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, 2022), 5; Mine Action Review, “Clearing the Mines,” (The Twenty-First Meeting of State Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, 2023), 5.

³ United States Department of Defense, *Integrated Country Strategy: Armenia*, May 04, 2022; United States Department of Defense, *Integrated Country Strategy: Colombia*, April 03, 2022; United States Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, *\$89 Million in New U.S. Humanitarian Demining Assistance for Ukraine*, August 09, 2022; USC Dornsife Institute of Armenian Studies “Russian Forces Conduct Extensive Demining Work in Karabakh,” February 28, 2021, <https://armenian.usc.edu/russian-forces-continue-demining-work-in-karabakh/>

have a clear goal regarding humanitarian mine action: the attainment of, or pursuit of durable peace in recipient nations. Demining operations have long been regarded as an effective measurement of peace in the long-term. They have a proven history of improving conditions in recipient nations economically, preserving life, and encouraging peace of mind from the reduction of landmines, all contributors towards improved long-term peace capacity within a nation.⁴ It seems simple that HMA would positively contribute towards peace-building. However, with debates over the merit of humanitarian action as a whole being prevalent in international relations, and individual criticisms of particular mine action agencies being commonplace, this assumption cannot be accepted without thorough analysis of the practical impacts of decontamination practices as a whole.

In this paper, I will demonstrate both the positive potential for humanitarian mine action, as well as the limitations that arise when demining operations are organized with additional political aims, or interpreted to be political action by local populations. This serves as a commentary on broader humanitarianism structures as well, and contributes to debates over the effectiveness and merit of humanitarian aid, as it serves to accomplish its goals of long-term development and stability.

In each of the case studies explored, the benefits and constraints differ based upon the specific country conditions, but the concern for politicization from governments operating in poor faith to local populations is a common thread throughout. Within this article, I will examine Cambodia, with one of the largest numbers of contaminated land, and one of the longest histories of demining operations, in order to evaluate highly organized and militarized mine action operations. Then, I will detail the efforts to demine Colombia, which suffers from a highly

⁴ Kristian Berg Harpviken & Rebecca Roberts, "Preparing the Ground for Peace: Mine Action in Support of Peacebuilding," *International Peace Research Institute* (2004).

politicized conflict and criminal operations that impact the structures in which HMA operations exist. Finally, I will analyze the demining efforts in Nagorno-Karabakh during the time of ceasefire, to evaluate the differences when conflict is interstate and unresolved, rather than resolved and intrastate, as well as ways in which demining efforts can contribute to peacemaking and collaboration more so than a focus on peace-building and stability. These case studies provide a wide array of conditions under which decontamination efforts show both potential and limitations from acts of politicization and political interpretation. This distinction of politicization works to demonstrate an area of failure frequently undiscussed in humanitarian aid as a whole and contributes to the conversation regarding the limitations when conducting humanitarian aid operations.

Literature Review: The Efficacy of Humanitarian Aid

On the surface level, humanitarian aid seems instinctive and purely altruistic in principle: aid is given to those who need it by those who can afford to spare it, for the betterment of the world. However, upon closer examination, the effective application and distribution of foreign aid is host to a wide variety of dilemmas and a plethora of scholarly debates. While aid ideally is something born of pure benevolence, in reality, it's much more complicated than that. Foreign aid is a tool for countries to extend diplomatic relationships, alter the status of the recipients, and display their humanitarianism to international society. However, even when examining exclusively the impact of humanitarian aid, there is no clear consensus on the baseline effectivity of foreign aid. While many view international aid as a core component to progress in developing and post-conflict societies, others point to colonialist lenses from which aid is supplied, and the harm that aid can do. Others, however, find both of these claims to be extreme, and instead believe that humanitarian aid is largely ineffective to those who need it most, as corruption levels

render it less effective and policy is the true determining factor in human rights conditions improvement.

Humanitarian aid has a wide array of adamant supporters, from politicians and diplomats to NGO leaders. Some supporters of aid, such as Thomas Pogge, argue for the moral obligation of developed nations to assist those in states of crisis because of their historical colonization that resulted in colonized nations' impoverished statuses.⁵ Others, such as Marcella Escobari, argue in favor of aid because it advances national interests to dispel conflict and provide positive associations with donor nations.⁶ Regardless of the reasoning, these arguments are contingent on the premise that aid works. Moreover, aid must actively improve the lives and advancement of human rights for recipients, as well as provide opportunities for economic growth and self-sustainment in the future. Recent studies have demonstrated optimism in this area, with Javier Abellán and José Antonio Alonso finding that aid had an overall positive impact on access to safe drinking water globally over a 25-year period, in line with UN sustainable development goals.⁷ Others have found that aid can encourage temporary stability in a region, that, when partnered with good institutional quality, can encourage foreign economic investment.⁸ NGOs and UN leaders tend to advocate greatly for global aid, with organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International frequently advocating for aid-based solutions to conflicts and natural disasters. Jody Williams, founder of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines,

⁵ Pogge, Thomas. "Real World Justice." *The Journal of Ethics* 9, no. 1/2 (2005): 32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-004-3313-z>.

⁶ Molli Ferrarello, "What 'America First' Means for US Foreign Aid," *The Brookings Institute* (July 2017).

⁷ Javier Abellán and José Antonio Alonso, "Promoting Global Access to Water and Sanitation: A Supply and Demand Perspective," *Water Resources and Economics*, 38 (April 2022): 100194, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wre.2022.100194>

⁸ Felicitas Nowak-Lehmann and Elena Gross, "Aid Effectiveness: When Aid Spurs Investment," *Applied Economic Analysis* 29, no. 87 (2021): 189-207, <https://doi.org/10.1108/AEA-08-2020-0110>

speaks about the incredible capacity of NGOs and civil society as not only a means for development but also a humanitarian pathway and coordinator for wide-scale disarmament.⁹

Others criticize the very premise of international aid, pointing to the flaws inherent in its structure. Prominent thinkers in this field focus on official development aid and view the assistance provided to developing nations merely as a political tool extended to maintain control and achieve neocolonial aims. These criticisms center around concerns for aid dependency; after all, how can a nation be sovereign and accountable to its people if a primary source of funding is a global power? The dilemma of dependency allows for the exertion of control from larger nations onto smaller ones, and with it, the expansion of colonial interests.¹⁰

Those critical of developmental aid programs claim that foreign aid, when in long-term use, can disrupt local and governmental independence. The introduction of foreign food supplies or technical experts, when not appropriately partnered with localized education and incentives to develop, can instead result in decreased demand for internal food sources or educated citizens.¹¹ These criticisms are often expressed in devastating exposés on the aid industry and the harm capability within it. The harshest critics of aid speak to the capability of aid to fund corrupt governments, assist in escalating conflicts, harm economies, and support authoritarian regimes.¹² Prominent critics such as David Kennedy, Michael Barnett, Linda Polman, and Thomas Weiss, point to historical uses of force to interfere with state sovereignty and fuel corruption. This criticism frames aid work as a business, funded with political and economic aims, and argues that it is naive to expect anything more. Polman applies a business analysis to the aid industry,

⁹Jody Williams, “Remarks by Jody Williams,” *Proceedings of the ASIL Annual Meeting* 116 (2022): 226-228. doi:10.1017/amp.2023.23.

¹⁰ Barry Riddell, “Yash Tandon. Ending Aid Dependence. Nairobi and Oxford: Fahamu Books; Geneva: South Centre.” *African Studies Review* 53, no. 1 (2010): 223–24. <https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0224>.

¹¹ Riddell, “Yash Tandon. Ending Aid Dependence,” 246.

¹² Linda Polman, *War Games* (UK: Viking ed., April 2011), 25-48.

claiming that NGOs distribute funding until they reach the absorptive capacity, unconcerned about the actual impacts, and instead focused on completing the goals of those paying them.¹³

This argument is reinforced by the failures of international organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, to appropriately respond to aggregate growth and economic progress from developing nations. As the IMF wields great economic power, both in the loans it provides and in how countries providing aid often take their cues from it, a lack of understanding from the organization can be disastrous to nations reliant on this assistance, especially if priorities lie in servicing the funders rather than understanding the recipients. Critics, such as Joseph Stiglitz, claim that the one-size-fits-all policies of the IMF limit nations that may have less clear paths towards progress, and can instead force supposedly sovereign nations into conformity.¹⁴ This is regardless of whether or not it makes practical sense for these nations. Those critical of the institution point to its attempts to prematurely liberalize financial markets or focus exclusively on inflation when concerns were better placed elsewhere.¹⁵ All of this decreases the sovereignty of aid-dependent nations, encouraging their conformity to standards that may be ill-fitting for their unique economies.

Furthermore, David Kennedy and Doug Mayhew argue that the structure of aid inherently victimizes the recipients. This can contribute to the preconceived notion of those in developing nations as unknowing and naive, in need of Western or colonizing saviors. The victimization narrative may contribute to the IMF's overreach of developing nations and undesired insertion into political matters as a requirement of aid funding.¹⁶ Kennedy expresses concerns over this

¹³ Polman, *War Games*, 25-48.

¹⁴ Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents Revisited: Anti-Globalization in the Era of Trump*. (2017) 120-130.

¹⁵ Allan Meltzer, "What's Wrong with the IMF? What Would be Better?" *The Independent Review* 4, no. 2 (1999): 201-15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24560891>.

¹⁶ David Kennedy, and Doug Mayhew. *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism*. Princeton University Press, 2004. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rsjc>.

victimization tendency, specifically as it may contribute to the spread of colonialist power, describing worries that humanitarian aid may be “a vehicle for empire rather than an antidote.”¹⁷

These critics, while pointing out apparent and adequate flaws, can overgeneralize humanitarian aid as a concept. While there is certainly truth in condemnatory analyses of individual institutions, there is also a tendency to overlook much of the good done by humanitarian aid. Pressures to have aid agencies abide by stricter rules, such as those Polman advocates for, are likely to only encourage the problems in a one-size-fits-all system. The generalizations made in aid-critical literature are often unnecessarily pessimistic as they group official development aid and humanitarian and emergency aid, as well as state-funded and NGO-funded aid when their problems are more distinctive to their unique structures.

Amongst those who are actively critical of humanitarian aid for the potential concerns for harm, others find issue with aid for a more benign, but still troubling reason: alleged ineffectiveness. With such extensive foreign aid given, it would be natural to expect recipient nations to be lifted out of poverty or at least experience an alleviation in their problems. However, some scholars claim this is not the case; instead, the role and successful distribution of international aid can be almost irrelevant in the face of who receives it. William Easterly claims that, while aid can be useful in reducing symptoms of disasters and emergencies, long-term aid may be ineffective more often than not. This, he claims, is due to the leadership in these developing nations being more inclined to pursue growth-killing policies and promote division of society for their gain, thus rendering attempts from aid to lift nations out of the poverty trap as overwhelmingly fruitless.¹⁸

¹⁷ Kennedy & Mayhew, *The Dark Sides of Virtue*, 5.

¹⁸ William Easterly, *The Elusive Quest for Growth*. (2001) 256-60.

This is especially concerning when the majority of humanitarian operations occur in states with dysfunctional public institutions with tendencies towards corruption.¹⁹ While aid is still believed to alleviate poverty in nations deemed to have “sound economic policy,” there is a common belief that recipients in nations with ineffective economic institutions or high corruption are simply beyond the practical assistance of developmental foreign aid.²⁰ Craig Burnside and David Dollar conducted an economic analysis of states that had received aid, and in nations with regressive economic policies, they found that “there is no significant relationship between aid and growth.”²¹ This confirms Peter Boone’s previous findings in 1996, which revealed that aid had little impact on both long-term economic development, as well as fundamental human rights such as reductions in infant mortality rates.²² As the foreign aid supplied did not incentivize policy to change, Boone claims, policies promoting health are not instituted. Therefore, despite influxes of aid, health does not improve, demonstrating that finances are not what primarily bars progress in developing nations.²³

It is notable, however, that the primary source of these economic analyses is restricted to the 1990s and early 2000s. There is a shifting consensus away from these claims of ineffectiveness, and more recent studies have found notable correlations between aid and public health and economic development.²⁴ These criticisms of aid would lead to more stringent policies from donors on qualifications to provide loans or aid in developing nations, which are the exact

¹⁹ “How to Keep Desperately Needed Humanitarian Aid Out of the Hands of the Corrupt.” *Transparency International*. October 2017.

<https://www.transparency.org/en/news/how-to-keep-desperately-needed-humanitarian-aid-out-of-the-hands-of-the-corrupt>

²⁰ Craig Burnside, and David Dollar. “Aid, Policies, and Growth.” *The American Economic Review* 90, no. 4 (2000): 847. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/117311>.

²¹ Burnside & Dollar, “Aid, Policies, and Growth,” 855.

²² Peter Boone, “Politics and the Effectiveness of Foreign Aid.” *European Economic Review* 40, no. 2 (1996): 323. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0014-2921\(95\)00127-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0014-2921(95)00127-1).

²³ Boone, “Politics and the Effectiveness of Foreign Aid,” 319.

²⁴Abellán and Antonio Alonso, “Promoting Global Access to Water and Sanitation,” 100194.

policies that economists such as Stiglitz and Tandon would criticize. The standards by which researchers from the ineffectiveness lens conducted their research often sorted the merit of economic policy based on inflation, something that is unable to be applied to all nations as an appropriate evaluation measure.

Each of these approaches has its merits in the flaws and successes of international aid, and none can be applied as a widespread rule for whether or not humanitarian aid will succeed. However, despite the flaws in the institution, it is also crucial to not understate the successes of foreign aid. It has historically been a key strategic peacekeeping tool, such as in the 1990s post-Cold War peace-building operations.²⁵ It has produced progress toward sustainable development goals, and its potential for future disarmament should be explored.²⁶ However, the good that it produces does not delegitimize any of the criticisms of its activities. Aid can quickly become ineffective or harmful when overgeneralized, operated from a point of political control and imperialist thought, not built towards self-sustainment, or siphoned through governments with high rates of corruption. But, this is not an accurate portrayal of widespread aid and the potential it holds for assisting those in developing nations, post-conflict societies, and those in the wake of disasters.

Defining Humanitarian Mine Action

In a more specific subset of humanitarian aid, humanitarian mine action serves to directly save lives and reduce the negative impacts of war from ceasefire or post-conflict societies. With over 110 million unexploded landmines estimated to still exist in the ground, and between 15,000 and 20,000 injuries each year, landmine efforts are necessary and ongoing to address this

²⁵Andrew Boutton and Vito D’Orazio, “Buying Blue Helmets: The Role of Foreign Aid in the Construction of UN Peacekeeping Missions.” *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 2 (2020)312-328.
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.neu.edu/10.1177/0022343319865929>

²⁶Jody Williams, “Remarks by Jody Williams,” 226-228.

issue.²⁷ Humanitarian mine action specifically works to disarm explosive remnants of war and reduce the hazardous effects of unexploded ordnance. Differing from military mine action, it is for the explicit aim of development potential and civilian safety, not for military or political purposes.²⁸ In this paper, I will be examining specifically the decontamination and landmine removal aspects of HMA. While there are other key components, such as mine risk education and stockpile reduction, these are secondary to defusing mines. I aim to specifically uncover the impacts of decontamination operations organized by HMA organizations, or efforts done with a stated mission of HMA.

Case Study: Cambodia

History of Conflict and Ordnance

Cambodia, a historically wealthy and prominent nation, has faced severe losses in livelihood, economic growth, infrastructure, and developmental capabilities following the decades of brutal conflict of the 60s and 70s.²⁹ During this conflict between the Khmer Rouge, Government of Cambodia, and other factions, 1.6-3 million Cambodians died of malnutrition, executions, exhaustion, and poor healthcare access.³⁰

Formerly a French protectorate, Cambodia obtained its independence in 1953, enjoying steady growth in the following decade. Upon entering the “Golden Age” of the early 1960s, King Norodom Sihanouk worked to develop major infrastructure projects that brought wealth and prosperity to the nation. However, interpreted to be too pro-communist in nature, and

²⁷ United States Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, *Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) Program*, December 05, 2023, <https://www.dsca.mil/humanitarian-mine-action-hma-program>; Minesweepers Towards a Landmine-Free World, Facts about Landmines, 2021, <https://landminefree.org/facts-about-landmines/#:~:text=Mine%20and%20explosive%20remnant%20of,every%205000%20successfully%20removed%20mines.>

²⁸ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, *Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) Program*.

²⁹ Koji Sakane, “Landmines in Cambodia, as a legacy of the civil war,” *JICA*, 1996

³⁰ Daniel Bultmann, “The Chronicle of a People’s War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War, 1979-1991,” *Pacific Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2019): 808–10.

controversial for his accommodations of Northern Vietnamese troops, Sihanouk was ousted by a coup in 1970. For the next 20 years, there would be immense conflict and civil war within Cambodia, with the Khmer Rouge's seizure of power resulting in the Cambodian genocide, killing millions of Cambodians.

American involvement contributed to the bloodshed, with the US Air Force dropping approximately 2,750,000 tons of ordnance on Cambodia from 1965 to 1973.³¹ Landmine usage was at its peak during this time, with approximately 4-6 million landmines being laid by conflicting sides, distributed broadly across Cambodia's countryside.³² This posed a huge problem for refugees, the majority of whom sought to return to the highly contaminated Battambang province of Cambodia following the war in 1991.³³ The civil war's destruction of existing infrastructure, partnered with the prevention of new infrastructure by widespread explosive ordnance remnants, resulted in a humanitarian crisis for the nation. There was no clear path forward to recovery and repatriation of refugees so long as the land that many would inhabit and areas in need of development were contaminated with landmines.

Following the resolution of the Cambodian Civil War and the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991, UNTAC was established to ensure a peaceful transition to democracy and post-conflict peace-building.³⁴ A key pillar of this was the instatement of UNAMIC, which conducted disarmament, demobilization, awareness, and reintegration processes. As a long-term replacement to the UN's temporary involvement, CMAC was founded as a governmental demining body in 1993, obtaining funding through a combination of the UN, the Cambodian government, and private donors. Since then, a variety of smaller organizations and transnational

³¹Eri Komukai, "Bridging towards Peacebuilding: Achievement of Cambodian Mine Action Centre and South-south cooperation facilitated by JICA," *Japan International Cooperation Agency*, February, 2016, 7.

³² Cambodian Mine Action Center, "History of CMAC," Accessed Dec 10, 2023, <https://cmac.gov.kh/en/article/history-of-cmac.html>

³³ Eri Komukai, "Bridging towards Peacebuilding," 20.

³⁴ Eri Komukai, "Bridging towards Peacebuilding," 24.

demining organizations have established a presence in Cambodia. With roughly one person killed per week from landmines in Cambodia since 1975, it is seen as a global hotbed for humanitarian mine action progress and research, and therefore a key location for global NGOs to establish a presence.³⁵

Developmental Impacts of Decontamination

The prevalence of indiscriminate explosive devices in Cambodia serves as a dire impediment to constructive peace-building and development following years of conflict. Economic recovery, reconstruction of social capital, and the rebuilding of the state system are crucial components of recommended peace-building measures in Cambodia.³⁶ While growing economically prior to the Civil War, Cambodia underwent a serious period of decline that needed to be remedied to effectively recover and move towards durable peace. The successful decontamination of over four million landmines since 1992 has allowed for an increase of over 160 km² of agricultural land and over 140km of irrigation canals.³⁷ Beyond agricultural opportunity, HMA in Cambodia has allowed for broader access to educational facilities, health centers, and the clearance of rural roads. These are all key for the health and safety of Cambodian residents, easing tensions post-crisis and building a more stable culture for peace.

Immediately following the crisis, the severe displacement of refugees impeded the capabilities of reconstruction in Cambodia. With a mass clearance of the Battambang region by native residents, and primarily former combatants still residing there, the inability to resume agricultural operations and daily life inhibited structures to promote peace from developing. The four provinces of Battambang saw mass clearance in 2004; thousands of refugees displaced into

³⁵ Mine Action Group, "About MAG," Mine Action Group, Accessed 10 Dec. 2023

³⁶Eri Komukai, "Bridging towards Peace-building: Achievement of Cambodian Mine Action Centre and South-south facilitated by JICA," *Japan International Cooperation Agency*, February, 2016

³⁷ Bjorn Gildestad, "Cost-Benefit Analysis of Mine Clearance Operations in Cambodia," *Global CWD Repository* 1155. (2005): 64-66. <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2176&context=cisr-globalcwd>

Thailand were able to return, reestablishing farms and schools in decontaminated land. This brought economic growth to the area, something that had been largely absent in the 15 years prior, a key component in durable peace development.³⁸

The economic growth, refugee resettlement, and agricultural land recovered demonstrates Cambodia as a prime example of the success that HMA can have. Having been conducted in the nation for so long, it is a crucial aspect of Cambodia's policy and foreign relations, and has worked to slowly transform the terrain of Cambodia to be livable once more. This has ensured safer livelihoods and positive peace progress through economic stability, development, and increased human rights security.

Former Combatants in HMA

A key pillar of Humanitarian Mine Action within Cambodia has been the integration and employment of former combatants into the decontamination process. With a lack of clear maps, a distinguishing factor of indiscriminate mine deployment in Cambodia, unlike more organized wars, is that the primary insights into mine locations have been from employed former combatants.³⁹ This unique access has generated progress for demining operations, but has also incorporated former military members from conflicting sides into joint HMA units. This first began in 1992 under UNAMIC, which provided training on mine clearance for demobilized soldiers from formerly opposing Cambodian political parties. With ex-soldiers from different parties in one demining unit, the very process of defusing landmines served as a trial operation in early Track II diplomacy strategy. Soldiers spoke fondly of the ability to work alongside one another and develop connections that diminished tension in their communities, demonstrating the

³⁸ Gildestad, "Cost-Benefit Analysis of Mine Clearance Operations in Cambodia."

³⁹ Eri Komukai, "Bridging towards Peacebuilding," 22.

role of these mine action units as a reconciliation pathway for combatants and an avenue for long-term peacebuilding.

While there is a diminishing number of former combatants in modern-day Cambodia, the practices established under UNAMIC were continued by CMAC in the years that followed. CMAC DDR units served as reconciliation spaces for ex-soldiers, a technique that has since been gradually explored and deployed in other locations.⁴⁰ Even thirty years after the resolution of the conflict, local NGOs, such as the Cambodian Landmine Museum, employ former child soldiers and war crime victims, thereby coordinating units that join the efforts and local knowledge of victims and ex-combatants.⁴¹

However, the benefits of this collaboration can be offset by potential damages to local populations. CMAC is a branch of the Cambodian military and decontamination requires a huge amount of military infrastructure.⁴² Upon entering local villages, distrust for the Cambodian military can grow amongst locals, and if projected onto the political parties that these ex-combatants represent, may reignite old conflicts. Operations by CMAC have had mixed results in Cambodia. While the benefits, as formerly discussed, are momentous toward peace progress, the mismanagement by the Cambodian government can seed discontent amongst local populations.⁴³

CMAC has a history of seizing lands from farmers, harming individuals who dispute the ruling party, and quelling protests from local landowners, resulting in HMA led by CMAC

⁴⁰Patrick Nowak, "Mine Action and the Reintegration of Former Combatants: Expanding the Debate," *The Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction* 25.3, June 7, 2022, 24-30.

⁴¹Ebonne Ruffins, "Cambodian man clears landmines he set decades ago," CNN Heroes, CNN, July 30, 2010, <https://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/07/29/cnnheroes.cambodia.demining/index.html>

⁴²Darcie DeAngelo, "Rats Clear Minefields-and Suspicion of Military-in Cambodia." US News, Nov. 17, 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-11-17/rats-help-clear-minefields-and-suspicion-of-military-in-cambodia>

⁴³Darcie DeAngelo, "Rats Clear Minefields-and Suspicion of Military- in Cambodia."

having potentially harmful effects on the trust and peace of villages.⁴⁴ The employment of combatants can contribute to the feeling that the government is only enforcing the “winner’s peace,” and bring back retraumatizing events as those in remote areas are once again exposed to both combatants and military weaponry. Perceptions of favoritism to those who enacted war, as the nation is attempting to rebuild peace, can also sow distrust in remote communities towards their government. Hostilities are primed to develop when former combatants act as agents for a government that the citizens do not trust, such as those working for CMAC in Cambodia. The combination of humanitarian efforts with underlying political aims causes distrust for any form of humanitarian mine action, inherently limiting the potential of HMA to contribute positively towards a community. When specifically working as decontamination specialists, they challenge the neutrality of all HMA operations, causing generalized discontentment upon Mine Action NGO’s entry into remote communities, and increasing hostilities that threaten broader peace-building efforts.⁴⁵

Land Rights

A pressing concern as CMAC operates widespread decontamination operations is the complications of land rights release and seizure, and therefore the disruption of rural farming operations and growing anti-government sentiments in remote regions. In order to conduct an HMA operation, the government must temporarily take control of the land and obtain land rights from the inhabitants to clear the area.⁴⁶ This includes the razing and leveling of the region, often disrupting future agricultural practices, as most landmines in Cambodia are in agricultural

⁴⁴ Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor “Landmine Monitor 2019: Contamination & Clearance 20-Year Overview,” September 2019,

<http://the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2019/landmine-monitor-2019/contamination-and-clearance.aspx>

⁴⁵ Nowak, “Mine Action and the Reintegration of Former Combatants,”

⁴⁶ Gildestad, “Cost-Benefit Analysis of Mine Clearance Operations in Cambodia.”

areas.⁴⁷ Upon completion of the decontamination process, the release of land back to the community can be controversial, and difficult to manage. When not effectively researched and communicated, old territory conflicts can reignite upon land release, triggering the hostile renegotiation of borders. Furthermore, as a result of gender discrimination, women in Cambodia are often less informed of their land rights and are thus more likely to fall victim to the process, resulting in a loss of their land.⁴⁸

While NGOs have a broader history of conducting prior assessments and post-demining impact assessments that mitigate these problems, politically motivated organizations in government often do not adhere to the same level of care. With the primary employees being ex-combatants and military members, successful negotiation and land usage policies are not emphasized so much as the technical component of demining.⁴⁹ Furthermore, there is a concerning history of government land seizure under the guise of landmine decontamination in Cambodia. One notable incident includes the grabbing of primarily woman-owned land near the Cambodia-Thailand border to build a casino. This action received large backlash from residents, who felt conned that the humanitarian efforts they had been promised were in fact an action to favor the government and wealthy investors. Rather than an earnest humanitarian action, the land seizure utilized demining to accomplish a political goal of increasing tourism with Thailand and encouraging border crossings.⁵⁰ These betrayals of local trust fuel anti-government sentiments in Cambodia, which can ultimately inhibit stable governance and security, a key component of

⁴⁷ Darcie DeAngelo, "Peaceful minefields: Environmental protection or security risks?" *Climate Diplomacy*, September 6, 2021, <https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/conflict/peaceful-minefields-environmental-protection-or-security-risks>

⁴⁸ Darcie DeAngelo, "Peaceful minefields: Environmental protection or security risks."

⁴⁹ Dahlia Simangan, and Rebecca Gidley, "Exploring the Link between Mine Action and Transitional Justice in Cambodia," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 31, no. 2 (2019): 226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2019.1608939>.

⁵⁰ Darcie DeAngelo, "Peaceful minefields: Environmental protection or security risks?"

peace-building.⁵¹ This is due to the practices conducted in poor faith by the Cambodian government, attempting to discreetly politicize HMA and utilize it as a tool for alternative political aims, rather than general humanitarian improvement within the scope of mine action.

Case Study: Colombia

History of Conflict and Ordnance

Beginning with the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948, leader of the left wing of the Colombian Liberal Party, Colombia would undergo a brutal ten-year war dubbed “La Violencia.” Arising out of a fierce political feud and contentious election, more than 200,000 persons lost their lives between 1948 and 1964.⁵² In the wake of La Violencia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) were founded as left-wing anti-government organizations. In the coming decades, these militant communist groups would launch acts of terror, kidnappings, and assassinations, funded primarily by drug trafficking and illegal resource extraction.⁵³

In 2000, the US began Plan Colombia, an aid package aimed at combatting guerilla violence and drug crime. Critics of the package attribute thousands of deaths to it, as well as severe internal displacement due to the harsh stance it took to crack down on rebel groups. This, as well as Colombian administrative crackdowns from then president, Álvaro Uribe, resulted in the weakening of FARC and ELN severely. A contentious resolution with FARC was reached in 2016, allowing the integration of former FARC members into society following disarmament.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ngin Chanrith, Neth Baromey, & Heng Naret, “Impacts of Economic Land Concessions on Project Target Communities Living Near Concession Areas in Virachey National Park and Lumphat Wildlife Sanctuary, Ratanakiri Province,” *Save Cambodia’s Wildlife*, November, 2016, 11-26.

⁵² Harvey Kline, “La Violencia, dictatorship, and democratic restoration,” *Britannica*, Accessed December 10, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Colombia/La-Violencia-dictatorship-and-democratic-restoration>

⁵³ Claire Klobucista & Danielle Renwick, “Colombia’s Civil Conflict,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/colombias-civil-conflict>

⁵⁴ Klobucista & Renwick, “Colombia’s Civil Conflict.”

A key component of the peace treaty hinged on a bilateral ceasefire and disarmament for guerilla troops. However, unexpected issues would arise in attempts to demine the land. A widespread problem, there have been over 12,000 injuries and deaths as a result of landmines in Colombia.⁵⁵ However, due to the disorganized factions placing these landmines, the construction was often resourceful and based off of recycled materials, undermining future detection and decontamination attempts. In other words, the guerilla troops were able to plant thousands of metalless, undetectable, landmines.⁵⁶

Developmental Benefits

In a post-conflict society such as Colombia, peace-building can be measured through an increase in social cohesion, political stabilization, and beneficial citizen-government relations. These are enhanced through economic growth, positive perceptions of governmental bodies, and improved security in communities, of which humanitarian mine action has greatly contributed to in the years since the conflict. A variety of NGO organizations have led efforts, including the HALO Trust and National Mine Action Authority, clearing explosive remnants of war with an emphasis on the Planadas region. HALO projects have employed women and residents, providing economic stability in the communities they enter and developing skills and career experience for women in particular. Property values rose significantly following demining operations, bettering economic growth opportunities, and increasing household incomes as agricultural productivity increased following decontamination. In a study conducted by Los Andes University, a survey of nearly 700 Colombian households found that, following HMA,

⁵⁵ ABColombia, "Demining in Colombia must remain a priority," May 14, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/colombia-demining-colombia-must-remain-priority>

⁵⁶ Diana Pedraza, "Artefacto Explosivo Improvisado: Landmines and Revel Expertise in Colombian Warfare," *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society* 3, no. 1, 2020, 476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2020.1804225>.

communities now use 88% of cleared land productively, as well as improved road access to hospitals, schools, and social services.⁵⁷

Decontamination has also improved social connectivity, with community members noting more cohesion in their communities as a result of increased feelings of safety and peace of mind.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the employment of former combatants has been implemented, assisting in the reintegration process for ex-soldiers into their communities— thus discouraging them from engaging in further hostile activities.⁵⁹

Technical surveys and the implementation of civilian operators by UN demining missions and the HALO trust mitigate issues with land release and environmental destruction, as otherwise seen in HMA operations. Due to the capabilities of spot-treatment on Colombia's primarily recycled and metalless mines, land release issues have been reduced by the HALO Trust. As they do not seize control of broader plots of land to conduct demining, and rather spot-treat found landmines, controversy regarding land release is infrequent.⁶⁰

These all contribute to an effective method of peace-building in a post-conflict society. When attempting to move towards durable peace, the employment of former combatants, social cohesion, economic growth, and security are all key factors that contribute towards a politically stable nation. These benefits demonstrate an extraordinarily positive impact from HMA on Colombian communities in terms of political stability and pursuit of durable peace, showcasing the progress that demining can contribute towards this post-conflict growth and development.

⁵⁷ Eric Keefer, "Demonstrating the Value of Humanitarian Demining in Colombia" *US Department of State*, June 03, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/dipnote-u-s-department-of-state-official-blog/demonstrating-the-value-of-humanitarian-demin-ing-in-colombia/>

⁵⁸ Keefer, "Demonstrating the Value of Humanitarian Demining in Colombia"

⁵⁹ UNDESA, "Removing landmines clears way for new opportunities in Colombia," *Department of Economic and Social Affairs*, Accessed Dec. 10, 2023,

<https://www.un.org/uk/desa/removing-land-mines-clears-way-new-opportunities-colombia>

⁶⁰ Mine Action Review, "Colombia: Clearing the Mines," 2022,

https://www.mineactionreview.org/assets/downloads/Colombia_Clearing_the_Mines_2022.pdf

Administrating Bodies

Outside of the HALO Trust, which has a large presence in Colombia, the other two largest contributors to decontamination efforts are the Colombian military and the United States. However, the positive impacts of the humanitarian mine action they conduct can be undercut by the source providing these demining efforts, as Colombians are often skeptical of the intentions and practices conducted by both their own government and foreign actors.

In Colombia, landmines have historically targeted military bases and government establishments, as well as serving as protection for FARC resources and criminal income sources.⁶¹ Due to this, landmine casualties were primarily members of the Colombian military. While this has changed in recent years, there is still a perception amongst Colombians that mine action is primarily self-service for the government, and intended to increase security of forces, not the general public. With this, the general population perceives demining as a state-strengthening act, rather than a humanitarian effort, rendering it susceptible to criticisms of the state, and discouraging support for HMA from those critical of the prevalence of the Colombian military in society. Rural communities that have experienced raids, investigations, and crackdown searches for illegal crop growth have demonstrated reluctance to support HMA, viewing the process as a mechanism and enabling force for military oppression.⁶²

Aside from resistance to the alleged agenda of the Colombian military, US interests in Colombia diminished the humanitarian impact and peace-building capabilities of its HMA operations. When enacting Plan Colombia, the United States aimed to combat drug production and leftist militancy in Colombia, furthering US national interests against communism and in

⁶¹ Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor “Colombia: Impact,” November 18, 2022, <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2022/colombia/impact.aspx#:~:text=Landmine%20clearance%20began%20in%20Colombia,first%20extended%20deadline%20of%202021.>

⁶² Diana Pedraza, “Ethical Disconcertment”

tandem with the War on Drugs. However, the execution of Plan Colombia negatively impacted many rural Colombians, who perceived it as victimizing innocent civilians in an ineffective war on drugs. Now, there is high skepticism towards US security interests in rural communities geographically linked to coca production, as they were frequently mistreated by the brutal actions of Plan Colombia.⁶³ Since the enactment of Plan Colombia, the United States has provided over 700 million USD for Colombian security purposes, supporting militarization efforts and supplementing military-based strategy to combat cocaine production. With this, rural communities now interpret the US forces entering to be representative of high militarization, making strides towards US political interests.⁶⁴

While the US does not have direct troops in play, the State Department funds private demining operational groups that work in conjunction with the HALO Trust.⁶⁵ This links US interest and association to the broader international HALO organization, which can encourage questioning of HALO's motives and the extent to which they're associated with the political will of the United States. Considering this political will has not historically benefitted Rural Colombians, reluctance towards NGO efforts in HMA has frequently resulted in protests and uprisings within rural communities who are distrusting of NGO's potential association with political foreign actors.⁶⁶

The association of NGO entrance with US foreign policy aims, or the priorities of the Colombian military can limit not only the efforts that those institutions have towards peace-building but also the effectiveness of other institutions. They compromise local acceptance

⁶³ Brendon Lee, "Not-So-Grand Strategy: America's Failed War on Drugs in Colombia," *Harvard International Review*, January 9, 2020, <https://hir.harvard.edu/americas-failed-war-on-drugs-in-colombia/>

⁶⁴ Lee, "Not-So-Grand Strategy: America's Failed War on Drugs in Colombia"

⁶⁵ United States Department of State, *U.S. Conventional Weapons Destruction in Latin America*, April 04, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-conventional-weapons-destruction-program-in-latin-america/>

⁶⁶ Pedraza, "Ethical Disconcertment" 472.

of NGOs such as the HALO Trust, encouraging hostilities and discouraging the social cohesion and positive peace of mind that HMA has the potential to promote in Colombia.

Local Resistance

Despite the economic and social benefits towards peace-building from demining processes, many residents of rural Colombia express hostilities towards demining efforts and foreign entrants into their communities in the form of HMA NGOs. They view them as opposing their own interests, often out of touch or against local needs, and nonrepresentative of the type of help that will better their lives overall.

One key component of this is the protection of coca plantations amongst rural farmers without other means of income. In southern Colombia, FARC established landmine barriers around rural coca plantations in order to protect their cocaine exportations as a form of income generation.⁶⁷ This practice, however, is illegal in Colombia. Illegal coca growth has been cracked down upon by security policies under former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez as a strategy to cut off income supplies from organized crime units and leftist paramilitary groups who funded anti-government operations through coca production, including FARC.⁶⁸ However, with the disbursement of landmines along barrier lines surrounding southern coca plantations and the región Cocalera (coca-growing region), it disrupted attempts to reduce coca farming following peace negotiations with FARC in 2016. Since then, demining operations have been deployed to these southern regions, attempting to gain access to coca plantations on behalf of the Colombian

⁶⁷ Vanessa Buschschluter, "How landmines complicate Colombia's drugs fight," *BBC News*, December 15, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-11980034>

⁶⁸ Amnesty International, "Colombia's coca farmers want viable alternatives, not militarization," March 10, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/colombia-coca-farmers-want-viable-alternatives-not-militarization/>

government in order to exact political will and curb the income of organized crime units from these farms.⁶⁹

In response to these attempts at demining, many local populations offer severe resistance. As coca production is a livelihood for many local populations, foreign entrants, even agents of humanitarian aid, are negatively received by these farmers. They perceive these aid workers and individuals to be representatives of their own government or foreign agencies attempting to undermine their coca production, and therefore their livelihood.⁷⁰ Rather than understanding it as a humanitarian effort, it is viewed as a deliberate governmental action and act of law enforcement, and therefore a political effort. Furthermore, with brutal activity from Colombian and foreign military presences on Colombian coca farms, local populations regard those attempting to curtail coca production as brutal actors of a cruel government's political will. Even when these actions are as life-saving and beneficial as demining operations, local resistance is prevalent and any external actors are considered threats to their livelihood.⁷¹

Aside from producers of coca, there were general fears from Colombians about the intentions of those involved in decontamination efforts. There were concerns about humanitarianism being a false pretense, and there being underlying economic or military motives.⁷² In El Orejón, protests erupted at the clearance of Alto Capitán, believing that it would be used to set up a military base in their community. This is in spite of the lack of military involvement entirely in the project, as it was operated by international NGOs. Colombians feared that demining operations were linked to government entrance in their communities, and the

⁶⁹ Diana Pardo Pedraza, "Ethical Disconcertment and the Politics of Troublemaking: Land Mines, Humanitarian Demining, and Ecologies of Trouble in Rural Colombia." *American Ethnologist* 50, no. 3 (2023): 462–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13198>.

⁷⁰ Pedraza, "Ethical Disconcertment and the Politics of Troublemaking"

⁷¹ Duncan Tucker, "Colombia's coca farmers want viable alternatives, not militarization," *Newsweek in Espanol*, March 10, 2020,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/colombia-coca-farmers-want-viable-alternatives-not-militarization/>

⁷² Pedraza, "Ethical Disconcertment," 463.

practice of intrusive and harmful government policy.⁷³ Due to this, they organized protests upon NGO entrance, blocking roads and access points to their communities. This disrupted the potential benefits of HMA and limited its capabilities towards peace progress.⁷⁴

Some feel as though they have adjusted to the local presence of landmines, adapting mechanisms in their lives to minimize injury and death. Furthermore, they feel they need the protection. As upsetting as the injuries and deaths they may witness are, the presence of military operations, foreign NGOs, and the exertion of government political will onto their local communities is seen as much worse, therefore manifesting itself in resentment and pushback towards humanitarian mine action centers.⁷⁵ Mine action centers can struggle to understand this complex psychology, and instead see those resistant as “political agitators” and “troublemakers.”⁷⁶ In this sense, the interpretation of HMA actors’ work as the pursuance of a militaristic political agenda, and a crackdown on crime, rather than simply an aid service, resulted in increased tensions and broader resistance to aid work as a whole. This is a disruption towards peace-building efforts, which, in this situation, are contingent on broader easing of tensions between political factions, including those in rural areas and their government. Additionally, local resistance is concerning for the possible impact towards alternative aid organizations, and the disruption towards peace-building efforts in a variety of ways.

⁷³ Pedraza, “Ethical Disconcertment,” 468.

⁷⁴ International Crisis Group, “Deeply Rooted: Coca Eradication and Violence in Colombia,” February 28, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/87-deeply-rooted-coca-eradication-and-violence-colombia>

⁷⁵ Pedraza, “Ethical Disconcertment” 464.

⁷⁶ Mariana Montoya, “Emergency and Non-emergency Support for Environmental Defenders: Pilot Project in Colombia,” *Support Committee Defend the Defender Coalition*, February 23, 2022, 10-11.

Case Study: Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh

History of Conflict and Ordnance

Since the 1990s, there has been ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the hotly contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh. While primarily ethnically Armenian (95%), the territory itself has historically belonged to Azerbaijan, which has mistreated the ethnic Armenians within it. This has resulted in attempts from Nagorno-Karabakh residents to assert their independence, or even shift land ownership of the territory towards Armenia. Fighting began in 1991, with the First Karabakh War resulting in over 25,000 casualties and over one million displaced persons.⁷⁷ Since then, while ceasefires have been successfully negotiated, any cooperation or settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been extraordinarily difficult to obtain, with both nations often refusing to negotiate and maintaining deeply embedded hostilities towards the other.⁷⁸ Renegotiations of land have occurred following periods of conflict as well, with Baku regaining the areas around Nagorno-Karabakh following the resolution of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020.⁷⁹ A key element to the conflict is also control over the Lachin Corridor, a passage connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, which was placed under Russian control following settlements in 2020.⁸⁰

Following Azerbaijan's seizure of new territories, the country was burdened with the high landmine contamination rates of this newly acquired land. With as many as a million landmines, rebuilding and development of infrastructure were impeded, creating an obstacle for

⁷⁷ Galina Yemelianova, "The De Facto State of Nagorno-Karabakh: Historical and Geopolitical Perspectives," *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 8 (2023), 1336-1359.

⁷⁸ International Crisis Group, "Defusing Azerbaijan's Landmine Challenge" May 31, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/azerbaijan/defusing-azerbaijans-landmine-challenge>

⁷⁹ Associated Press, "Azerbaijan fully reclaims land around Nagorno-Karabakh," *PBS News Area*, December 1, 2020,

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/azerbaijan-fully-reclaims-lands-around-nagorno-karabakh>

⁸⁰ Center for Preventative Action, "Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 16, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/nagorno-karabakh-conflict>

Azerbaijan's desire to repopulate the land. As a result, Azerbaijan conducted landmine clearance operations that continue in present day.⁸¹ This longstanding conflict was settled recently, in September of 2023, with Azerbaijan's successful invasion and subsequent seizure of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory, resulting in Armenian surrender. For the purposes of this paper, I will be examining the time period prior to Azeri takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, and after the Azeri acquisition of territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. More specifically, I will evaluate the mechanisms of HMA on the acquisitioned land, and what its contributions were towards peace-making between the Azeri government, the government of Armenia, and the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Development

The issue of landmines in Azerbaijan has impeded progress, stability, and conflict resolution capabilities for a long time. When landmines are triggered in Azerbaijan, it is often met with Azeri backlash and anger towards Armenians. Regardless of when they were planted, Azeri leadership tends to attribute landmine triggers as current attacks and responds with language accusing Armenia of violating ceasefire agreements, continuing to provoke Azerbaijan, and committing crimes against civilians.⁸² In fact, shortly before the brutal invasion of Azerbaijan into Armenia in 2023, Azerbaijan began publicly emphasizing landmine casualties, outlining attacks in previous years to blame Armenia and discredit their claims of adherence to the ceasefire agreement. These attempts to blame Armenia for cease-fire violations based on

⁸¹Jemej Zimpersek, "Regional Mine Action as a Confidence-building Measure," *The Journal of Mine Action* 11, no.1, (2007), 2.

⁸² Reuters, "Azerbaijan says six citizens were killed by land mines, blames Armenians," *Jerusalem Post*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-759665>; Daily Sabah, "Armenian land mines kill civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan," February 12, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/armenian-land-mines-kill-civilians-in-nagorno-karabakh-azerbaijan>

landmine deaths came only days before Azerbaijan's invasion, with landmines being used to justify Azerbaijan's attack to come and attribute fault to Armenia in the public sphere.⁸³

These casualties from landmines increase hostile tensions, both towards the Armenian government and ethnic Armenian citizens in Nagorno-Karabakh. Azeri language can become brutal towards Armenians, with accusations of Armenian disorder and violence.⁸⁴ Therefore, when decontamination efforts are pursued in Azerbaijan, it reduces opportunities for tensions to increase and hostile language to be used towards Armenians. In this sense, HMA acts not necessarily as a peace-building measure, but rather as a conflict-avoidance and deescalation strategy.

In addition to conflict prevention, HMA has the ability in Azerbaijan to promote economic and infrastructural development. After Armenia obtained land around Nagorno-Karabakh in the first Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan reacquired much of this land in settlements following the second Nagorno-Karabakh War.⁸⁵ Following this reacquisition, Azerbaijan sought to return Azeri refugees, who had fled after Armenian acquisition, to the territory to resettle the land. However, it was heavily riddled with landmines that served as a huge barrier to repopulating the war-torn landscape and promoting broader development and land use. HMA operations served to assist in the return of these refugees, reducing the burden refugees placed on the state. Furthermore, the land use by these refugees is primarily for agriculture, increasing economic production, and employing citizens, which has demonstrated a positive relationship with peace and stability.⁸⁶ By reducing the negative impacts and fallout

⁸³ Reuters, "Azerbaijan says six citizens were killed by land mines, blames Armenians."

⁸⁴ Daily Sabah, "Armenian land mines kill civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan,"

⁸⁵ Associated Press, "Azerbaijan fully reclaims land around Nagorno-Karabakh."

⁸⁶ Chiara Torelli, "Landmines in Azerbaijan continue to pose a lethal threat to peace and development," AOV, June 23, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/azerbaijan/landmines-azerbaijan-continue-pose-lethal-threat-peace-and-development>

from the First Nagorno Karabakh War, decontamination reduces the factors that prolong hostilities directed at Armenians from Azeri residents.

Nonetheless, it is notable that the positive impacts of decontamination towards economic and refugee stability do not contribute to peace-building to the same extent as they do in nations such as Cambodia or Colombia. Whereas those conflicts are civil and due to instability, Azerbaijan is a much more stable nation, both politically and economically. The causes of war in Azerbaijan are based on land acquisition from an authoritarian government, historical brutalities, and ethnic divides. This renders peacekeeping efforts through humanitarian aid less effective, as the primary method towards peace is not through improvement of humanitarian conditions.⁸⁷ Additionally, the decontamination efforts conducted have not been as successful a path towards development as other nations, despite Azerbaijan's greater potential to fund demining operations. Although Azerbaijan has greater capability towards funding decontamination, and publicly speaks about Armenian-placed landmines frequently, there is less motivation from the administration to address landmines, as well as less international support.⁸⁸

Landmine Map Negotiations

While landmine decontamination may not bring about peace solely through increased stability and economic growth, it has promise in an alternative arena: negotiations. Armenia and Azerbaijan have been historically reluctant to negotiate with one another, although both publicly claim their desire for peace and settlement.⁸⁹ Despite this, Azerbaijan and Armenia negotiated a deal to exchange Armenian prisoners of war in exchange for maps showing nearly 100,000

⁸⁷ Michael Findley, "Does Foreign Aid Build Peace?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, (2018), 359-384. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041916-015516>

⁸⁸ Sultan Hajiyev & Vugar Suleymanov, "The world needs a new solution to its landmine problem," *Aljazeera*, October 2, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/10/2/the-world-needs-a-new-solution-to-its-landmine-problem>

⁸⁹ Al Jazeera, "What to know about the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire," September 20, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/whats-happening-in-nagorno-karabakh-between-azerbaijan-and-armenia>

landmines in the Azeri-acquisitioned territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh.⁹⁰ It was a rare conciliatory gesture between the nations and a promising development for those who had hoped the two countries could come to a peace agreement at the negotiations table. The landmine maps still held by Armenia and hostages held by Azerbaijan encouraged the international community to have hope for future exchanges as well, thus establishing a pattern of collaboration.⁹¹

However, this agreement quickly turned sour. While the completion itself was a monumental success in an otherwise bleak history of negotiations, both countries were quick to follow up with accusations of dishonesty from the opposing side. Armenians believed that the continued detainment of prisoners was misleading by Azerbaijan, who had relabelled them as captives rather than prisoners of war, disallowing them protection under the Geneva Conventions.⁹² Conversely, Azeri president, Ilham Aliyev, was also quick to condemn Armenia's actions in the negotiations, claiming that the maps of minefields' locations were only 25% accurate.⁹³

Moreover, following Armenian relinquishment of landmine maps, Azerbaijan was very quick to seize this as an opportunity to blame the nation publicly for the keeping of the maps. Prior to this, Armenia had repeatedly claimed to not hold any landmine maps for the regions surrendered to Azerbaijan in 2020.⁹⁴ However they admitted their possession of landmine maps to guarantee the return of hostages from Azerbaijan. Hypothetically, this could have been a

⁹⁰ David Herszenhorn, "Azerbaijan trades Armenian prisoners of war for mine maps," *Politico*, June 12, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/azerbaijan-armenia-prisoners-war-nagorno-karabakh-landmine-maps-blinken/>

⁹¹ Joshua Kucera, "Armenia and Azerbaijan exchange detainees for mine maps," *Eurasianet*, June 12, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/armenia-and-azerbaijan-exchange-detainees-for-mine-maps>

⁹² RFE/RL, "Azerbaijan Hands Over Armenian Soldiers In Swap For Land Mine Maps," *Eurasiareview*, July 4, 2021,

<https://www.eurasiareview.com/04072021-azerbaijan-hands-over-armenian-soldiers-in-swap-for-land-mine-maps/>

⁹³ Ilham Karimli, "President Aliyev Blames Armenia for Providing Inaccurate Minefield Maps," *Caspian News*, August 16, 2021,

<https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/president-aliyev-blames-armenia-for-providing-inaccurate-minefield-maps-2021-8-16-0/>

⁹⁴ RFE/RL, "Azerbaijan Hands Over Armenian Soldiers In Swap For Land Mine Maps."

promising gesture of cooperation. Yet, Azerbaijan quickly exploited this, advertising that Armenia was hiding landmine maps from them, and purposefully harming their citizens.⁹⁵

The maps obtained were not exclusively used to aid citizens, which would result in positive peace progress, or to negotiate with Armenia, which could hold promise for further cooperation. Rather, the landmine maps were used as a tool by Azerbaijan to reflect negative international attention onto Armenia and publicly guilt them in a deliberate political act. This disrupted progress towards cooperation, with accusations of dishonesty discouraging either side from engaging in further agreements. No similar negotiations were conducted in the future, until Azeri success in gaining control over Nagorno-Karabakh. The progress in HMA through the acquisition of landmine maps was promising for peace but was disrupted by the political agenda of the Azeri state, which turned it into an opportunity to harm Armenia's public image and served to reduce the potential for future negotiation.

State Militaries

Impediments to the peacemaking capabilities of landmines also come in the form of potentially instigating sources of HMA. In the surrounding areas of Nagorno-Karabakh, which is primarily populated by ethnic Armenians, the Türkiye Armed Forces have been a key contributor to demining efforts. While primarily in the form of technological assistance and donations of demining machines, Turkey also sends direct troops to assist their close ally of Azerbaijan in demining efforts.⁹⁶ However, interactions of these troops with Armenian populations can be jarring for Armenians, who have an incredibly contentious historical relationship with Turkey,

⁹⁵ Joseph Hammond, "Landmines Threaten Agriculture in Ukraine and Azerbaijan but, Innovative Solutions are on the way," *Forbes*, August 26, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zengernews/2023/08/26/landmines-threaten-agriculture-in-ukraine-and-azerbaijan-but-innovative-solutions-are-on-the-way/?sh=7f66172df57d>

⁹⁶ *Turkey Sending Own Demining Machines to Azerbaijan*. TCA Regional News. Chicago: Tribune Content Agency LLC, 2021.

which conducted the Armenian genocide in WW1.⁹⁷ Due to the poor nature of this relationship, the placement of Turkish forces directly outside of and surrounding an Armenian dominated zone is cause for concern regarding the safety, deescalation of tension, and peace of mind for ethnic Armenians.

Furthermore, ANAMA and the Demining Battalion of the Ministry of Defence are the two largest national actors in Azerbaijan for demining activities.⁹⁸ While the former is not a direct subset of the military, it uses military mechanisms and employs former members of the military. The latter is an extension of the Azeri military and a subset of the Defense branch of the Azeri government.⁹⁹ This results in highly militarized Azeri forces working closely next to ethnic Armenians on humanitarian demining operations. This is a problem regarding the troubling history of interactions between these groups, with the Azeri military having a history of torture, violence, rape, and murder against ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁰⁰ These ANAMA operations result in frequent interactions between ethnic Armenians and Azeri HMA groups, who use the Lachin corridor as a regular access point and frequently enter Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁰¹

Due to the tendency of the Azeri military to engage brutally and violently, as well as fear of Azeri forces from Armenians, the processes of placing these forces in predominantly ethnic Armenian lands can increase hostilities from residents of Nagorno-Karabakh towards Azerbaijan, acting directly against peacemaking efforts. For the Armenians, the presence of

⁹⁷ Ronald Suny, "Armenian Genocide," *Britannica*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Armenian-Genocide>; Maretha Umarach & Ali Muhamma, "Azerbaijan's Strategy to Win the Conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh Territory with Armenia in 2020," *Journal of Islamic World and Politics* 7, no. 1 (2023): 2. <https://doi.org/10.18196/jiwp.v7i1.49>.

⁹⁸ Mine Action Review, "Azerbaijan: Clearing the Mines," 2023. 2-3.

⁹⁹ Crossroads Global Hand, "Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action," Accessed December 10, 2023, [https://www.globalhand.org/en/organisations/24419#:~:text=Being%20responsible%20for%20planning%20and,2%2C%201999%20\(Project%20No.](https://www.globalhand.org/en/organisations/24419#:~:text=Being%20responsible%20for%20planning%20and,2%2C%201999%20(Project%20No.)

¹⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Azerbaijan: Armenian POWs Abused in Custody," March 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/19/azerbaijan-armenian-pows-abused-custody> ; Erik Davytnan, (2023) "Lessons that Lead to War: Foreign Policy Learning and Military Escalation in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," *Problems of Post-Communism*, (2023) DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2023.2183410

¹⁰¹ Erik Davytnan, "Lessons that Lead to War," 4.

ordnance specialists is not seen as a humanitarian effort, but rather a message from the Azeri government of their military authority and dominance.¹⁰² The humanitarian mine action is operated by representatives of the state, and thus, is interpreted as a political message from Azeri authority. This politicized interaction works to anger Armenians, and position them against the Azeri government as they carry over ethnic trauma from historically brutal Azeri military actions inflicted upon them. Any effectiveness towards peacemaking from HMA is severely reduced by the hostilities it may increase amongst Armenians, which actively disrupt peace progress.

Analysis

In each case study presented, there has been both incredible positive potential for the capabilities of HMA to provide long term benefits for peace-building, as well as severe caveats from either governments acting in bad faith and politicizing their humanitarian work or the interpretation of political will in solely humanitarian actions. Cambodia has perhaps the strongest benefits from HMA, having been conducting decontamination operations for decades and using it as a crucial fixture of development policy. However, as the majority of HMA is conducted by a branch underneath the military, there are interpretations of decontamination as a military action, and often political will that negatively impacts local populations, such as land seizures. This serves to increase hostilities towards the government and limit the “peace of mind” component that mine action should bring, thus disrupting progress towards peace-building and stability.

It is a similar situation in Colombia, in which landmine removal has the potential to revitalize its primarily agrarian economy and increase the safety of rural farmland. Yet, Colombians’ distrust towards foreign actors and the government, both in the form of US entrance

¹⁰² Neil Macfarlane and Larry Minear, *Humanitarian Action and Politics: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh*, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies (1997), 70.

and the Colombian military, can cause severe local resistance upon encountering organizations attempting to decontaminate its landmine-riddled land. Colombia demonstrates how this can extend towards nonpolitical entrants as well, with Colombians gaining distrust of NGO presence due to hostile entrance from the Colombian military attempting to assert political will, or the US government, which is associated with political aims. This hinders not only the peace progress of HMA done by the government, but also by NGOs that act in good faith for solely humanitarian purposes, therefore corrupting broader aid efforts beyond HMA.

Azeri HMA efforts differ from their distinction of only being in ceasefire, not yet having reached a peace agreement in the time frame studied. The key capabilities of mine action to encourage stability and collaborations were quickly undermined by other political aims, including utilizing landmine maps to blame Armenia, rather than conduct positive peace progress. The role of potentially aggressive or politically motivated demining bodies also acted as a disrupting force towards peace progress, with Turkish and Azeri military forces angering residents of Nagorno-Karabakh and actively increasing tensions.

In post-conflict societies recovering from intrastate conflicts, HMA operations can be overwhelmingly productive to act as a potential for development and stability. However, it is dependent on the administrating bodies and whether or not they act with ulterior political motives, as well as the conduct being exclusively for humanitarian goals and perceived as such. However, the benefits are less clear in a state experiencing interstate conflict between two stable governments, in which the economic and stabilizing landmine decontamination process does not necessarily promote peace within a nation. This provides powerful insights into the effectiveness of HMA as a peace-building tool in states' arsenals. While it certainly has merit when deployed

to stable nations, valuable in decreasing tensions and the preservation of human life, its ability to establish durable peace is fairly limited.

In the case of Azerbaijan, this is an interstate ethnic conflict, in which increased economic growth is not demonstrated to have nearly the same capability towards peace-building as other nations. The factors motivating conflict are not from a lack of development or stability, as is the case in Colombia or Cambodia. Mine action in Azerbaijan thus far has focused on the preservation of Azeri lives and resettlement processes for Azeri citizens, limiting its capabilities towards promoting peace with Armenians. Rather, the entrance of Azeri and Turkish military forces to conduct HMA operations next to Armenians, tensions may increase, and the operations can be counter to peace-building goals.

This also speaks to the importance of the distributing agency for HMA. While military forces may have limited ability in their humanitarian efforts due to political motives, this doesn't necessarily speak to the potential for NGO efforts. However, as demonstrated by local resistance in Colombia, it is perceptions of politicization as well that limit peace-building potential. Due to distrust of external actors, residents responded to aid workers with hostility, limiting the capability to improve community relationships and broader peace of mind. This is not a death sentence regarding peace-building potential of HMA NGOs, but it is a limitation imposed from perceived politicization of demining operations.

While HMA can make incredible progress in peace-building, the politicization of mine action has the potential to disrupt this process, as demonstrated in Cambodia, Colombia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. This accompanies broader claims of humanitarian aid. It corroborates success stories and the real potential that mine action and aid, in general, have towards long-term stability and peace-building. However, it also does not disprove criticisms, with ineffectiveness

and even potential negative impacts being a real possibility. It does, however, provide a key condition under which this ineffectiveness or harm takes place: the general misuse of humanitarian activities to obtain ulterior political goals, or the interpretation of humanitarian action as political.

This relationship between the politicization of HMA and the extent to which it is effective in peacebuilding reflects broader arguments on the dangers of corruption and misuse of humanitarian aid, contributing to either its harm or ineffectiveness. Aid can be used to further external motives, such as fears regarding the exaction of imperialistic will, as demonstrated by US interference in Colombia in the use of HMA to fight the War on Drugs. Furthermore, corruption and misuse can render aid ineffective towards long-term development, such as the use of HMA to conduct land seizures from the government in Cambodia. The key factor of politicization lies underneath these discussions, with external political motives corrupting the potential for aid in general, as it has done with HMA. Aid is rendered less effective, or even harmful, when exploited for these political motivations, encouraging hostile interactions with local populations and holding the potential to actively harm communities.

However, often unmentioned in discussions surrounding the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, these case studies have demonstrated that it is not just the exploitation and politicization of aid work that is a danger to its efficacy, but also the fear of exploitation from local communities. Armenians fear the HMA operations conducted by military forces, an organization with a history of harm to them, in the same structure as how Colombians protested the entrance of the HALO Trust, an NGO without political motivations except to decontaminate the land. It is not the distinct actions that render these operations less effective towards

peacebuilding, but the fear of misuse and political will being exacted without consent from local populations.

This provides insights into how humanitarian aid can fail, both on parts of the distributors as well as the distinctive cultures of the recipients. While politicization is a threat, it is also this fear of politicization due to historical negative encounters that can render aid work ineffective towards long-term development and peacebuilding. It is not to say that humanitarian aid is ineffective overall, as the success in nations such as Cambodia demonstrate its incredible potential. However, there are real dangers in administration and reception of aid that can negatively impacts its efficacy.

Conclusion

Efforts towards a mine-free world are ongoing, and there is still a lengthy path ahead, with over 110 million landmines still in the ground now.¹⁰³ However, as demining efforts continue, it is crucial to ensure that they are conducted in ways that best promote peace, progress, and stability. As demonstrated, when politicized and exploited to accomplish other aims, decontamination efforts can compromise humanitarian action overall, and interrupt the growth of developing nations. Additionally, the interpretation of HMA as political due to a history of government oppression and interference can serve to build enough mistrust so as to encourage local resistance to humanitarian aims. This serves to disrupt the incredible potential benefits of humanitarian mine action, and humanitarian aid overall. This is reflected in broader discussions of humanitarian aid by scholars cynical of its efficacy, who point out that it can do harm, come from an imperialist perspective, or damage communities from poor structures.

¹⁰³ Defense Security Cooperation Agency, *Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) Program*.

To conduct truly effective humanitarian mine action and aid, states must act with solely humanitarian aims within the scope of these projects, and limit rural communities' exposure to hostile government and foreign agents, so as to not encourage resistance towards external groups. Humanitarian mine action holds the potential to be a key factor in recovery, development, stability, and peace; however, this cannot be accomplished if it is used as a shell for political actions, or interpreted as such.