Clearing the killing fields

Alex Vines, Director of Regional and Security Studies at Chatham House, urges the UK government to increase support for action against landmines in Angola...

Prince Harry’s trip to Mozambique in June 2010, to see minefields cleared by Halo Trust, one of the favourite charities of Diana, Princess of Wales, passed almost without press attention. This contrasts with his mother’s visit in January 1997 to Angola, the other Lusophone country in southern Africa, which increased pressure to introduce an international antipersonnel landmine ban. At a prosthetic centre in Luanda, the iconic photograph of the princess with a young Angolan landmine survivor was taken, and later published on the cover of Hello! magazine and seen across the world.

‘The number of people killed by landmines in Angola almost tripled in 2010, as funding for demining activities plummeted. There were 80 victims of landmine accidents in 2010, compared with 28 in 2009.’

Mine action is important and dangerous development work – in which the UK is a world leader. It seems to have fallen out of ‘media fashion’ in recent years. It is an issue I follow closely as I almost stepped on a landmine in 1992 while in northern Angola as an electoral officer for the United Nations. Until then I knew little about landmines, and the experience was a very personal reminder of how dangerous and indiscriminate these weapons were for civilians.

The announcement in November 2010 of an overhaul of the UK Government’s support for international mine clearance programmes also failed to attract a lot of interest, despite it being the first major review since May 2004. According to the Department for International Development (DFID), this new policy will focus on ‘the number of lives that will be saved; the number of mines in the area; the benefit to a community socially and economically and targeting funding towards countries that are unable to fund their own mine clearance programmes or do not receive significant support elsewhere from the international community’.

That more than £30m has been committed by the UK for the next three years to mine action is to be welcomed. Funding will continue for Afghanistan, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Iraq, Lao PDR, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Vietnam; but complete cuts have taken place for Angola, Somalia, Colombia and Nagorno Karabakh in the South Caucasus.

Such reviews require political choices, and there are winners and losers. The biggest loser is Angola’s rural poor. Funding for mine clearance programmes in Angola has been declining since civil war finally ended in 2002 - although the problem of landmines remains serious and widespread. According to Halo Trust, funding for its efforts has declined by 50% since 2008. The trust began winding down its Angola operation in October 2010.
having been told by DFID there was no more cash because the new policy excludes Angola. Financial difficulties have resulted in the closure of its operations in southern Benguela province, although 667 minefields still need to be swept. In 2008, Halo destroyed 12,024 mines in Angola, at a cost of $8.1m – or about $670 per mine – a tiny cost in comparison to the DRC, which DFID continues to support.

DFID’s cutting of its £2m mine action programme in Angola means hundreds of trained de-miners risk losing their jobs, and further delay in declaring this important UK partner as mine-free. The number of people killed by landmines in Angola almost tripled in 2010, as funding for demining activities plummeted. There were 80 victims of landmine accidents in 2010, compared with 28 in 2009.

Even the then US Ambassador to Angola, Dan Mozena, visited London last year and lobbied the new Coalition Government to continue supporting mine action in Angola through DFID. When the cuts were imminent he stated: “I cannot believe what DFID is doing. It will mean the maiming and killing of people will continue apace as people go back to [mine-ridden] rural areas which were depopulated. The casualties will continue unless these mines are pulled out, and they will not get pulled out on their own.”

DFID announced closure of its Angola programme on 2nd March although the country is still the world’s third most mine-contaminated country (after Afghanistan and Cambodia). Despite oil wealth, the southern African state suffers from endemic urban and rural poverty due to inequality and underdevelopment. DFID views Angola as oil-rich and able to fund itself. Ministers have decided to focus on large programmes that offer opportunities for significant aid spend, in comparison to small country programmes like Angola’s, because it works out cheaper for DFID to administer large amounts of money than smaller amounts – cutting administrative costs per pound spent. This Whitehall bureaucratic ‘logic’ also fails to recognise Angola as an emerging regional power with peacekeeping capabilities. The UK Coalition Government must look to deepen relations with Angola, not cut back. The country was the UK’s third largest Africa market for visible exports and is the tenth largest import market in Africa in 2010.

An unintended consequence of this new mine action policy has been increased competition for DFID funding among the UK’s leading mine action charities. The Dumfriesshire-based Halo Trust lost a legal challenge at London’s High Court in January 2011 after a £3.5m contract for Cambodia went to its rival, the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) from Manchester. Halo had claimed that the International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell breached procurement rules but the judge upheld the contract award as it was measured not only in the ability to clear mines and ordnance but also for its plans to help impacted communities recover. This ruling was a blow for Halo, which employs 1,000 people on mine clearance work in Cambodia, and now 400 risk losing their jobs. MAG has announced that increased DFID funding will allow it to expand operations in Cambodia and it is likely to offer some of them new jobs.

The Coalition Government needed to review mine action policy and make tough decisions. Andrew Mitchell’s wrong call was to cut mine action funding for Angola – funding that fulfils DFID’s new mine action criteria better than certain other continued beneficiaries, and to a country that is an increasingly important partner for the UK. Hopefully when this decision comes up for automatic review in late 2012, the International Development Secretary will seriously review this decision.

Alex Vines
Director, Regional and Security Studies
Chatham House
Tel: +44 (0)20 7957 5718
AVines@chathamhouse.org.uk
www.chathamhouse.org.uk

The US Ambassador to Angola, Dan Mozena, criticised the UK Government’s withdrawal of funding for mine action in the country.