

Press Releases: Briefing on U.S. Demining Efforts Around the World

Special Briefing

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Via Teleconference

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MR GREENAN: Thank you, David. And thank you, everyone, for joining us for today's on-the-record conference call. We have with us Jerry Guilbert, who is the chief of programs for the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. He's here to discuss with us U.S. contributions to demining efforts around the world in the context of the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action, which is today. Again, I remind everyone this call is on the record, but please note that the contents of the call will be embargoed until the call has concluded.

So with that, I'll hand it over now to Mr. Jerry Guilbert. Thank you.

MR GUILBERT: Thanks. Good afternoon, everyone. Well, he said my name is Jerry Guilbert; I'm the chief of programs for the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, and my job is to oversee U.S. humanitarian mine action assistance programs around the globe.

Today, the United States provides conventional weapons destruction funding, which includes humanitarian mine action as well as small arms and light weapons threat reduction programs, to over three dozen countries across the globe. We're active in every continent except for Africa and Antarctica, and we have an annual budget of about \$189 million, which was included in the most recent appropriations for Fiscal Year 2018.

Today, in honor of International Mine Awareness Day, we thought it was appropriate to review some of our conventional weapons destruction successes. With over 20 years of humanitarian mine action assistance, provided courtesy of the generous support of the American people, we've had a profound impact around the globe. Together with our interagency and international partners, we've helped 16 countries declare themselves mine-free. We have reduced land mine casualty rates by more than 60 percent outside of the Iraq and Syria contexts, which are very special. And we've also destroyed nearly 39,000 man-portable air defense systems, or shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. We reduced over 90,000 tons of ordnance in nearly 40 countries around the globe.

With that, I'm happy to take any questions on the U.S. humanitarian mine

action assistance programs.

MR GREENAN: All right. Thank you very much. We'll now go to our first question.

OPERATOR: First question from the line of Alexey Bogdanovsky, RIA News Agency. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, hello. My question is about Iraq and Syria. It has been reported that there is a difficult situation including land mines there. Do you have any information on how the demining process is being done right now?

MR GUILBERT: Yeah, absolutely. Northeastern Syria and areas liberated from ISIS control has been a key focus of U.S. humanitarian mine action assistance over the past year. Since 2017, the United States has invested about \$38 million to clear improvised explosive devices, unexploded ordnance, and land mines from Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij, and surrounding areas. With our implementing partners on the ground, to date we've cleared over 15.5 million square meters. We've removed over 20,000 land mines, IEDs, and pieces of UXO. We've provided mine risk education to 235,000 Syrians, including internally displaced persons who are returning into Raqqa. And we've removed explosive hazards from 235 critical infrastructure sites, such as clean water pumping stations, hospitals, schools, and electrical infrastructure – including the Raqqa and Tabqa hospitals, the Baath Dam, and the Tabqa Dam – to ensure that life can start returning to some semblance of normal in these liberated areas.

MR GREENAN: Thank you. We'll take the next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next is Felicia Schwartz, *Wall Street Journal*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks so much for doing this. Could you talk about how the freeze on funds that the President ordered – on stabilization funds in Syria that the President ordered last week is affecting the work that you just described that you're doing in Syria? And when – I understand that there's some money in the pipe that you're using, but are you making preparations for what happens when those funds run out and the funds aren't unfrozen?

MR GUILBERT: Sure. So as of today, our operations in Syria remain as they were last week and the week before. We continue our work of clearing critical infrastructure sites and trying to keep people who have already been brutalized by ISIS once from being victimized again. In line with the President's request to review all international assistance, we continually re-evaluate appropriate assistance levels across programs and across countries, because we want to make sure that these taxpayer resources are being utilized as effectively as possible. We're continuing to work with our international partners, members of the D-ISIS Coalition, as well as our partners on the ground, to ensure that we're providing much-needed stabilization support. And as you saw from the White House just this morning, we're going to continue to consult with our allies and friends regarding future plans.

MR GREENAN: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next is Kylie Atwood, CBS News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing this. So a quick kind of understanding as to where you guys are in this process in Syria on the whole. You said that there have been, I think, 15.5 million square meters that have been cleared. Do you have a sense for the number that remains to be cleared that you guys have identified as areas that you still need to clean out?

And my second question is with regard to consulting with allies on this and kind of footing the bill for these projects, is the State Department a part of those conversations with allies or is that being led primarily by the White House? Thanks.

MR GUILBERT: Getting to your second question first, the State Department is very much involved in those conversations with allies. To date, I mentioned that over the past year we've provided about \$38 million to clear explosive remnants of war in Syria. We've also received direct contributions from the governments of Germany, Latvia, Kosovo, all providing funding directly to our mine action clearance programs in Syria, and that's funding that came directly to the State Department to support the programs that we have going.

Above and beyond that, the Government of the Netherlands, of the United Kingdom, Norway, Canada, they've all provided direct funding to other NGO operators who are doing this work inside of Syria as well.

So not only are we having conversations directly with our allies to solicit contributions to offset our own costs, our allies are also investing additional money beyond that directly with NGOs who are doing this work on the ground.

In terms of how much more work remains to be done in Syria, we've cleared 15 and a half million square meters. What remains? That question is really hard to answer, and the reason is no one has conducted a wholesale survey of what the scope of explosive contamination in Syria is, especially in these liberated areas. Anecdotally, we can tell you it's bad; it's amongst the worst contamination in the world that our program has come across in over two decades of programming. But the reason we haven't conducted a holistic survey is because those surveys are expensive and they're time-consuming, and right now we see the more pressing need as providing immediate assistance to the people who need it most. And so our focus has been on clearing these critical infrastructure sites to make sure that returning people have access to health care, clean water, and education as they start to move back home.

At some point in the future I'm sure the international community will start taking a look at what the holistic contamination picture is, but right now that's not something that our focus is.

MR GREENAN: All right, thank you very much. Are there any other questions on the call right now?

OPERATOR: No further questions in queue at this time. Actually, we do have a

question in queue. It's going to be from the line of Matthew Russell Lee, Inner City Press. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Great, thanks a lot and thanks for doing the call. I wanted to ask two things. One has to do with Myanmar, which I know is not a signatory to the conventions, but it's said to be laying land mines on its border with Bangladesh. Is the U.S. concerned about that, doing anything about that?

The other one is very nitty-gritty. I don't know how much of the U.S. assistance goes to the UN Mine Action Service, but I just asked them today about a contractor of theirs that was killed while demining in South Sudan last month, and it's not clear to me sort of how much of the money that you're describing, is it really done – is it done through UN agencies, is it done through their contractors? And when someone does in fact die, as happened in this case in South Sudan, are they compensated? What's the sort of – what arrangements are made to make sure that they're taken care of? Thanks.

MR GUILBERT: Thanks a lot. Regarding the question of Burma, right now we have very limited mine action programming inside of Burma. Our focus has largely been on risk education to keep vulnerable populations who live near landmines safe as well as providing some victims assistance to people who have fallen prey to landmines. As you know, the humanitarian situation in Burma overall remains a key concern for the United States, and landmines and landmine contamination continues to be a part of that overall humanitarian concern that we have.

Regarding your question about funding for UN mine action service or UN agencies more generally, for the most part, the State Department doesn't provide very much funding to UN mine action service for mine action programs. Most of our budget – like I said, it's about \$189 million for Fiscal Year 2018 – that funding is going to go directly to NGOs and contractors who are in the field doing the work themselves. We found that doing direct grants to NGOs or direct contracts is the most effective way to use taxpayer funding because it removes the most number of middlemen as possible, making sure that every dollar that can go to actual clearance on the ground is going to clearance on the ground.

Unfortunately, it is a dangerous business, and from time to time, the NGOs and contractors whom we work with do have casualties. In those cases, each one of those NGOs or contractors will have corporate policies in place for what to do should a casualty occur. We insist that all of our operators are fully insured and that their personnel are fully insured so in the event of an accident, there is an appropriate financial safety net there for the people who are putting their lives on the line every day.

MR GREENAN: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Gotcha, thanks a lot. Sounds like the contract from South Sudan maybe would have been better if they were working with you, but thanks a lot.

MR GUILBERT: Sure, thank you.

MR GREENAN: I think – is there any – are there any additional questions in queue?

OPERATOR: Yes, from the line of Conor Finnegan, ABC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks very much for holding the call. I just wanted to follow up quickly on Kylie's question. I know you said the problem is on such a large scale, but at what point then would you say that the U.S. would consider its work to be done? Is it going to be part of that holistic approach with the international community or is it just getting people back into their homes in these different cities that you mentioned?

And then just a quick follow-up: Can you say how many American officials are on the ground doing this work – contractors or employees?

MR GUILBERT: Sure. I think for security reasons, we don't get into the nationalities of the specific folks on the ground who are doing the work. In terms of when we'll be able to say that our job is done, we never went into this from the beginning with the view that the international community was going to clear Raqqa or clear Syria. Ultimately, this has to be viewed as a Syrian problem that is in need of a Syrian solution. What we want to do is make sure that we can clear the most pressing and urgent hazards that stand in the way of providing basic human services to IDPs who are returning, so, like I said, electricity, clean water, schools and hospitals.

Beyond that, we are also working carefully with our Syrian partners on the ground to train them in clearing – in this explosive hazards clearance work so that someday, in the not-too-distant future, Syrian – our local Syrian partners on the ground will be able to continue this work on their own without continual sustained international assistance.

MR GREENAN: Thank you very much. I think we have no further questions in the queue, so we thank everyone for joining us today, and the embargo on the contents of the call has now been lifted. As a reminder, this call was on the record and wish everyone a pleasant afternoon. Thank you.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, that does conclude your conference. We do thank you for joining. You may now disconnect.

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