

Speech: Importance of International Mine Awareness Day: Article by Tom Burn

It's over 20 years since Princess Diana walked through a heavily mined field in Angola, and changed the way the international community thought about this appalling and indiscriminate weapon of war. Shortly after that historic visit, the Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction was signed, creating an established framework through which the world could work towards eradicating these barbaric weapons.

Mines and unexploded ordnance leave a terrible legacy of war, long after the guns have fallen silent. Hidden from sight, they continue to kill and maim innocent civilians going about their daily lives. Their very presence hinders development and prevents families and communities from being able to return to their land and rebuild.

Sri Lanka is no stranger to the long-lasting suffering that mines cause. In fact, by the end of the conflict, over 500km² of land was contaminated by landmines. Today marks the International Day for Mine Awareness, the first one since Sri Lanka acceded to the Ottawa Convention in December 2017. Signing up to the Ottawa Protocol demonstrated the government's commitment to meeting its ambitious target of becoming Mine Impact Free by 2020.

The UK supports Sri Lanka in its efforts to clear every single mine on this beautiful island. That's why the British High Commission in Colombo has been funding demining work in Sri Lanka since 2010. Between 2010 and 2019, we will have spent over £6.2 million (LKR 1.2 billion) on demining all across the North and East of Sri Lanka. Working mostly through our partners, The HALO Trust, our goal is to clear more than 600,000m² of land between 2016 and 2019, making it safe for people to move home and start cultivating their land again. Together with a range of Sri Lankan and international partners, we are making progress. Last year, we joined celebrations to mark the milestone of Batticaloa becoming the first District in Sri Lanka to be classified as mine "residual risk" free. Many organisations helped to ensure this significant result. We are proud that another British Demining charity, the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), working alongside the Humanitarian Demining Unit of the Sri Lankan Army and others, made a major contribution to achieving this great feat.

In the last year, UK support helped clear 142,549m² of land of mines, unexploded ordnance and stray and small ammunition; our clearance activity has benefited 5,215 people; a further 11,139 individuals, including women and children, have received UK supported mine risk education.

That's what makes demining such an important part of the UK's wider commitment to reconciliation and peace-building in Sri Lanka. Not only does

it offer immediate humanitarian benefits, but it also accelerates recovery from conflict. Families can live and farm. Children can play without fear. In the short term, it also offers employment opportunities to some of the most vulnerable, including female heads of household. The HALO Trust for instance has a workforce that is over 50 percent female, helping young women affected by the conflict to make a real difference in the future of their communities.

Last year our Minister for Asia, the Rt Hon Mark Field MP, visited the North to hear from those working on the frontlines of the demining effort. I too visited last November, seeing for myself the scale of the challenge. With anti-personnel mines still covering the ground in great numbers, the risk is still very real, though significant progress has been made. The Halo Trust's thorough and professional clearance operations mean that land can be handed back to those displaced many years ago. I met one family who had already begun rebuilding their lives in their old home. With new crops planted and a sense of optimism about the future, meeting them was a great reminder of exactly why this sort of work is so important.

Since 2010, much has been accomplished, and together we have dug many thousands of mines and unexploded ordnances from the ground. Thousands of mines that can no longer threaten the lives of ordinary Sri Lankans. Whilst we should take pride in this shared achievement, there is still much more work to be done. On International Mine Awareness Day, let's redouble our efforts to realise the dream of a mine-free Sri Lanka by 2020.