

Jean-Baptiste Richardier, co-founder of Handicap International, was present at the 20th International Meeting of Mine Action National Programme Directors and United Nations Advisors, which ended on 10 February 2017.

Here, he explains why Handicap International is committed to humanitarian mine action.

Dear colleagues and friends,

I would like first to thank Agnès Marcaillou that invited me to speak in this session in order to make some archeology in the story of mine action. Indeed, I am actually a kind of “remnant” in this assembly of the handful of people who dared to believe that mines should be eradicated from conventional weaponry in the early 90s.

I will always remember the first mine victim whom I met. She was a 10 years old Khmer refugee. She was suffering an untellable pain. I will never forget the violence of her silent weeping, while looking at her femoral stump. Ironically enough, I was then working in the camp of Khao I Dang as an obstetrician, contributing to the rebirth of a population that had endured the madness of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Mine accident were presented at the time as mere collateral damages... but 6000 Khmer seeking refuge were maimed by this weapon that was littering the provinces bordering Thailand! It is this shocking reality that triggered the revolt leading to the creation of Handicap International, which was followed by 10 years of intensive repair to rebuild shattered lives.

Then I remember meeting with Ray Mc Grath, who was busy drafting his report on mines in Cambodia: The Cowards War. I offered him to translate it in French, so that we could distribute it to all members of the French parliament.

I remember the letter US Senator Patrick Leahy sent us, suggesting that “socialist France” was the only permanent member of the Security Council that would accept to call a revision of the Protocol II... We immediately requested a meeting with Danielle Mitterand who convinced her husband to do so. The conference that took place in Vienna was suspended and reconvened in Geneva; it is its failure that led to the Ottawa process.

I remember the founding meeting of ICBL in New York in October 1992 with representatives of Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, Physicians for Human Rights, Human Rights, Medico International, new born Mines Advisory Group and Handicap International. ICBL was born with this blunt utopia, obviously bigger than us: to ban a conventional weapon for the first time in history!



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Meanwhile in 1993: HCR was facing an irreconcilable contradiction: the massive repatriation of Khmer refugees to an unsafe land! The growing polemic led an HCR official to express publicly his bitter frustration: "Yes, Cambodia will eventually be cleared of mines... one leg at a time"; we were told that he was fired.

It is the time Halo Trust launched quick non-technical surveys that offered a picture of the status of the land where refugees were to be repatriated ("probably mined / probably not mined"...) that looked less than satisfactory. But it was much better than nothing at all.

In panic, HCR Cambodia Desk HQ requested Handicap International's assistance to evaluate whether Mad Mitch's plans¹ could really be... trusted. We invited the only expert whom we knew at the time, Rae McGrath... I let you appreciate the tension in the room.

I remember late Sergio Viera Demello and François Fouinat requesting Handicap International to contract the first 90 Khmer deminers that had been trained by UNAMIC, as lawyers in New-York refused for six months to give them a UN status given the risk of accidents... We accepted despite the fact that the agreement mentioned explicitly that we would have no say in procedures and operational deployment ...

I recall my fear during the first reconnaissance that we made on the field...! I also remember the visit I made to the UN training Center (the future Cambodian Mine Action Center) with a British TA from MAG. When he asked what nationalities were actually training Khmer deminers, his answer was: "British, Pakistani, Bangladeshi,... and the fucking French !" Obviously he thought I was British myself. Ambiance...

Then I remember the HI/MAG co-action agreement that I engineered with Ray Mc Grath and lasted for two years in Cambodia and Northern Irak. The first large scale fundings we obtained within two weeks were the EU, DG 1 for Cambodia; and ECHO for Kurdistan. "It's Christmas" said to me Ray happily!

After 2 years of rewarding co-action, Handicap International mine clearance division was created in 1996, with Bill Howell at its head, with soon programs in Cambodia, Laos, Mozambique, Angola and Bosnia... In a South to South approach that proved to be quite efficient, I remember in particular enjoying several fruitful contributions from very well trained and hardworking Gurkas.

Of course I remember December 1997 and the signing ceremony of the Ban Treaty in Ottawa which was the triumph of Loyd Axworthy, a courageous diplomat. Beyond the excitement around the treaty, I remember my father, who had insisted to accompany me in Ottawa, telling a Canadian journalist that he had volunteered during World War II to operate the first anti-tank detectors tested by the French army...

Surely enough I remember the Nobel Ceremony in Oslo, with Khmer activist Tun Chanareth raising the Nobel Peace Medal that he had accepted on behalf of all of us alongside co-laureate Jody William ; I remember the frantic, joyful and *non-protocolaire** dancing I had with Lou McGrath at the cocktail, that somewhat puzzled invitees and the Nobel Committee...

I remember the two extraordinary meetings convened by Bob Eaton (gathering all NGO actors and UN) that took place in Brussels to work out guidelines for national surveys. Indeed, HI had pioneered national surveys in support of UXO-Lao where Ian Mansfield was operating at the time. The creation of the Survey Action Group later led to the Survey Action Center (SAC) intended to centralise and uniformly present data in a standardized format. Per Neergard from NPA, Bob Eaton, Bill Howell and I will carry and look after this initiative for several years until survey of most countries would be completed. SAC was criticized at some point, but I believe that it was necessary and served its purpose at the time, offering a data base of well documented SHAs, paving the way to the area

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reduction and land release concepts. In addition, the Survey Working Group (SWG) that was steered by the SAC, is remembered today as an example of cooperation among all stakeholders coming together on a quarterly basis.

I also remember the “NGO Perspective on mine action”, gathering NPA, HI, DCA, DDG and either MAG or Halo... Humanitarian Mine action was still considered a purely military endeavor then. Early on, together we had pushed successfully for the definition and endorsement of humanitarian standards in mine action. And we strengthened our joint influence on the UN and the sector as a whole.

I remember a UN sponsored Seminar Djellalabad under the Taliban. It was around the findings of a Study Report by Bob Eaton, Chris Horwood and Nora Niland: “The Development of Indigenous Mine Action Capacities in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia and Mozambique”. It was groundbreaking for future structuration of national capacities.

I remember that tough discussions divided the industry in the early days on topics such as protective equipment, the use of dogs, mechanical versus manual clearance... Millions were invested in Research and Developments...

Before the GICHD took over its comprehensive research role HI endeavored to produce two field based studies: the first comprehensive survey on Mechanical demining and a thorough survey on the use of detection dogs. I remember the 8 puppies (4 Pyreneans shepherds and 4 Border Collies) that HI sent to the UN training Center established in Peshawar upon the request of its STA who was willing to test smaller and more resistant dogs than the traditional German shepherds favored by the Afghans. After six months, the trial was abandoned due to the fact that dog handlers couldn't adapt to the behavior of these unusual dogs... which were offered to eight happy new owners!

Looking back at these 20 years of humanitarian mine action, and beyond their own operational capacity several useful improvements were influenced by NGOs. The use of detection dogs and ground preparation machinery was most widely developed within the operations of NGO mine action organisations that led to more rapid responses, with mobile dog teams, and smaller machines, enabling responses at the level of community needs. Generally, NGO tendencies to think and act from a grass roots development vision of affected communities and individuals, benefitted national programs. Sustained community level MRE led to better data through community level contacts. Improved attention to the safety of deminers, through collaboration with detection equipment manufacturers, and design of deminers protective clothing, was a crucial contribution, as well as the elaboration of SOPs beyond the scope of often underdeveloped national standards.

Overtime mine action gathered people from horizons so different. It had its “guru”... But we shared the same enthusiasm, the same faith and the same fever, motivated by the urgency for concrete action and tangible impact on civilian populations and their land! We have in common a deserved pride of achievements. We enjoyed great moments, unforgettable fiesta late in the nights, and an unabated very special sense of humor! I am grateful to have had the opportunity to be part of that quite unusual human venture.

During my tenure, I got to know many retired or ex-military individuals. They contributed to the ability of the NGO demining community to do its job efficiently, effectively and above all safely. They shared their skills, their sense of discipline and duty with the NGOs which in turn shared their vision of social care and societal development at the community and individual levels. In addition to a better mutual understanding between these two distinct communities of actors, often assumed to be incompatible, each was able to integrate the best aspects of the other into its own approach to the benefit of the sector as a whole.

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In conclusion, Humanitarian Mine Action is about putting the people at the heart of our concern for their safety and protection, as well as caring for the victims, through a Comprehensive Approach. Before the Ottawa and Oslo treaties, victims from mines, cluster munitions and ERW were confronted with a dual neglect: delayed care and delayed clearance. Things have improved quite a lot since, even if convincing donors remains difficult at times to consider victim assistance as a crucial element of life saving activities, or to fund the right level of clearance and risk education.

From the onset of UNMASS, NGOs enjoyed a real support from its teams in continuity with the “working together spirit” that Martin Barber engineered from the start. Mind you, facing the unprecedented pollution in Syria will demand much of the same, to ensure the right of civilians to safety and protection.

As a final word, please keep in mind the powerful symbol of Broken Chair facing the “valley of flags” on Place des Nations. HI and sculptor Daniel Berset built it in support of the Ottawa treaty to ban landmines; later at the invitation of Norwegian Ambassador Steffen Kongstad we dedicated it in support of the Oslo Treaty to ban Cluster Munitions; and last June, we extended its meaning to express our refusal of armed violence inflicted on civilians, particularly the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

My generation is now retiring. From a personal perspective, Bill Howell and I feel proud to be permanent members of the “Intergalactic EOD organization” founded by Lance Malin and poetry writer - deminer Chris North !

Your task is now to complete the commitment that was made 20 years ago. Doing so, I encourage remaining daring, adaptable and principled.

I am sure you will. Good luck!

ⁱ Colin Campbell Mitchell, known as “Mad Mitch” was the founder of Halo Trust,