

27th International Meeting of Mine Action National Directors and United Nations Advisers (NDM-UN27)

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Keynote message

29 April 2024, 10.00 AM, CICG Amphitheatre D, Geneva

Excellencies, dear colleagues, friends,

It is an honour to be here at the 27th Meeting of Mine Action National Directors and UN Advisers. I've been asked to speak on the theme of this year's meeting: **"Protecting lives. Building peace."**

Protecting lives is the main objective of the United Nations – whether we provide physical protection, negotiate a ceasefire, distribute humanitarian assistance, reduce armed violence, support community resilience, or invest in socio-economic recovery and development.

Protecting lives has always been at the center of mine action efforts – whether with a view to mitigating risk to save lives and limbs, empowering individuals and communities to build greater resilience, or enabling conditions for better economic future.

In 1999, 25 years ago, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1265, the first resolution on the **protection of civilians**. This resolution is the foundation of the protection of civilians agenda, which includes:

- Enhancing **compliance** with applicable international humanitarian law;
- **Protecting vulnerable** populations;
- Facilitating **humanitarian assistance**;
- and providing protection **through United Nations peace operations**.

Mine action is in a unique position to enable support to these.

The mine action sector has always **advocated for states** to adhere to international humanitarian and disarmament law, and support explosive ordnance affected countries in meeting their treaty obligations.

The sector has **mobilized behind the Political Declaration** on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, which recommits signatories to international law relevant to the use of explosive weapons, to reduce and respond to the devastating consequences of these weapons on civilians.

Mine action operations protect the lives of **displaced persons on the move** in unfamiliar surroundings and enable the safe return of internally displaced persons to their areas of origin.

In 2022, explosive ordnance was reportedly responsible for more than 25 per cent of the 8,600 children maimed or killed in 24 countries and the Lake Chad basin region. This only serves to underline why explosive ordnance risk education is so vital.

The release or clearance of agricultural land can reduce **food insecurity**.

Mine action enables **humanitarian actors to reach communities in need** and vulnerable communities to safely access basic services such as water points and hospitals.

Finally, as the Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations, I have seen first-hand how **mine action components of peacekeeping operations** protect civilians and enable a mission's other protection activities.

In **South Sudan**, UNMAS UNMISS neutralized and mitigated explosive ordnance threats, including by surveying, and clearing potentially hazardous areas. Subsequently, cleared land has been used for UNMISS bases, displaced persons sites, medical facilities, and schools, while cleared roads facilitated the safe movement of civilians, enhanced the mobility of peacekeepers and enabled humanitarian actors to deliver lifesaving assistance.

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

Let me turn to **how mine action builds peace**.

Recently we have seen the integration of mine action into **peace processes**, including in Colombia.

In **Colombia**, several provisions of the peace accord defined specific roles for mine action along the following lines:

First, humanitarian demining is recognized as a precondition for the implementation of other public policies including those related to the substitution of illicit crops and the collective return of internally displaced

persons, and was implicitly mentioned as a pre-requisite for the execution of national rural development plans.

Second, service of ex-combatants to the humanitarian demining process was accepted as a form of sanction within the transitional justice framework.

Third, participation of ex-combatants in mine action was viewed as an action that repairs damage caused by the conflict and contributes to reversing its effects.

Finally, mine action was identified as providing employment opportunities for ex-combatants and an option for economic and social reincorporation.

This is just one example of how mine action contributes to **sustainable livelihoods** for former combatants, **enables agriculture, fosters reconciliation** and supports national authorities to **prioritize early recovery** and sustain the long-term work required.

Underlying the success of these efforts are **partnerships**.

The United Nations, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, and many bilateral and regional partners work **in support of national authorities** to prioritize those tasks most conducive to reconciliation and peacebuilding, to ensure that national mine action authorities manage information about the contamination on their territory, and to build national capacity in the security sector and among NGOs to tackle the explosive legacy of war.

Excellencies, dear colleagues, friends,

Several **trends challenge** the ability of the mine action sector to protect lives and build peace.

First, we are seeing **new contamination in populated areas in recent and ongoing conflicts**, in which parties employ landmines, cluster munitions, improvised explosive devices and generate explosive remnants of war.

In some ongoing conflicts, like **Gaza**, survey and clearance efforts are expected to take millions of dollars and years to complete due to the scale of explosive ordnance contamination.

In **Sudan**, the widespread use of conventional weapons has left unexploded ordnance littering Khartoum and other areas, posing a direct threat to civilians. One year since the start of the conflict – some 25 million people — half of

Sudan's population – are in need of lifesaving assistance, including explosive ordnance risk education.

In **Ukraine**, since February 2022, there has been an industrial use of landmines along with cluster munitions, artillery shells and a vast array of weaponry. And the impact of this contamination extends globally.

According to estimates of the Government of Ukraine, land currently contaminated with explosive ordnance **provided food for 81 million people** before the war, mostly to middle- and lower-income countries. Now, even with the 3,500 demining engineers in Ukraine, **it will take at least 20 years to clear the agricultural land alone.**

The second worrying trend is the increased **use of IEDs by non-State armed groups.**

The presence of IEDs turns the routine use of roads, access to markets, and work in agricultural fields into a life-threatening activity.

As IED **technology** keeps changing, it is harder to detect devices and prevent harm.

IEDs **restrict the mobility** of not only civilians but also humanitarian personnel and peacekeepers, thereby impeding the delivery of humanitarian aid and limiting the ability of peacekeepers to protect civilians.

I would like to illustrate the evolution of this threat with two examples: in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, a change in tactics by a non-state armed group led to increased IED attacks directed against civilians in public places. In **Mali**, the IED threat expanded over time from the North to the Centre and more recently to the West and South of the country.

One thing remains a distressing constant – **civilians bear the brunt and are most at-risk** – as IEDs are often placed on major roads or near crowded public infrastructure like a bus where mass casualties may result from a single incident.

Peacekeepers have been increasingly targeted as well, including in the Central African Republic and our former mission in Mali and more recently in the DRC, making it difficult for mission personnel to deploy safely to protect civilians.

In 2022, explosive ordnance incidents involving peacekeepers, including IED attacks, killed 16 and injured 72 others. In 2022, the Central African Republic

witnessed the first peacekeeper fatality caused by explosive ordnance and the first clear case of a device made with homemade explosives.

A third and final challenging trend I would like to raise relates to significant gaps in the **universalization of, reporting on and compliance with** relevant treaties and norms.

Over 30 Member States, including major producers, stockpile holders and users, **have yet to express their consent** to be bound by the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. **And over 70 Member States** remain outside the framework of the Convention on Cluster Munitions.

This is unacceptable.

These trends undermine all the ways in which mine action contributes to the building blocks of the protection of civilians agenda - they **weaken** international legal frameworks; **threaten** displaced persons and children; **impede** the delivery of humanitarian assistance; and **challenge** protection efforts by United Nations personnel and humanitarian mine action actors.

Excellencies, dear colleagues,

Meetings like this one give me hope. Everyone here today has come ready to play a key role in **Protecting Lives and Building Peace**.

I am impressed by the **range of participants** that have come together from mine-affected countries, donors, NGOs, commercial partners, academia and the UN to learn from each other, share best practices, and to build stronger partnerships.

Dear Colleagues,

Before closing, I would like you to consider three next steps.

- 1. It is urgent that we bolster our responses to the expanding threat of IEDs/improvised mines.**

Collectively, we must strengthen our efforts to prevent, respond to and mitigate these threats. We need to encourage relevant actors to address transnational transfers of materials used to build such devices and prevent the exchange of bomb-making expertise among perpetrators of attacks.

International support should also focus on enabling explosive ordnance risk education, victim assistance, more systematic data collection of cross border

movement of IED components, and the establishment of sustainable national capacities.

The Fifth Review Conference of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention in Cambodia later this year is an opportunity to further define our collective response to these threats, as it is important to bear in mind that improvised anti-personnel landmines are a type of IED that can be addressed within the framework of the Convention.

2. We must increase momentum around advocacy for universalization of relevant treaties and norms.

The Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons will help us save more lives and create conditions more conducive for peace and development.

I commend actions taken in 2023 by South Sudan, which acceded to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and by Nigeria, which ratified it.

I also urge States that have not yet done so to endorse the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas adopted in 2022.

Last week's first follow-up conference in Oslo provides another touchstone towards the full and meaningful implementation of this political declaration.

3. We must redouble our efforts to ensure that funding for mine action meets critical urgent needs and also supports the sustainability of ongoing efforts to meet clearance obligations in a timely manner.

The success of our efforts depends on predictable, flexible funding from all available sources. Discussions over the next days will undoubtedly explore this in more detail and resource mobilization will be a topic for discussion amongst National Directors tomorrow. I encourage you to think creatively and bring your innovative ideas.

Dear Friends,

Lastly, allow me to emphasize that the United Nations remains your steadfast partner.

In the recently updated **United Nations Mine Action Strategy**, twelve United Nations entities recommitted to a shared vision of a world free from the threat of mines, explosive remnants of war, and improvised explosive devices through people-centred, integrated approaches in support of national efforts.

Let this 27th Meeting of National Directors International Meeting of Mine Action National Directors and United Nations Advisers be a catalyst for more collaboration towards a safer, more secure world where people can enjoy their rights without fear of explosive ordnance.

I wish you a successful meeting in the days ahead.

Thank you.