

## MINUTES

### MASG MEETING

THURSDAY, 24 OCTOBER 2024

#### PERMANENT MISSION OF ITALY TO THE UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK

##### 1. OPENING REMARKS

**1.1 Chair.** The Deputy Permanent Representative of the Mission of Italy to the United Nations in New York, Ambassador Gianluca Greco, opened the meeting at 10.00 hours and welcomed the 35 in-person participants to the meeting, along with the 21 people joining on-line. Ambassador Greco gave apologies for the regular chair of the MASG, Ambassador Massari, who was unable to make the meeting. Ambassador Greco then welcomed ASG Zouev from DPO and Ms Ilene Cohn, the Director of UNMAS, to the meeting. Ambassador Greco outlined the agenda and the arrangements for the meeting. Finally, he noted that Italy had been the MASG chair for the last two years and that this would be the fourth and final meeting under their chair.

**1.2 ASG Alexandre Zouev, OROLSI, UN DPO.** The Chair invited Mr Alexandre Zouev, the ASG from the Office of the Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) within the UN Department of Peace Operations to address the meeting. ASG Zouev said his comments were on behalf of USG Lacroix, who sent his apologies. Mr Zouev started by saying that he was grateful to Italy for chairing the MASG, and also for the other support Italy provided to DPO, such as police training, the Brindesi logistic base, etc. Mr Zouev also noted that today, 24 October, was UN Day and because of that he would need to leave the meeting early to attend other events.

ASG Zouev started his presentation by thanking the donors for their ongoing support, and highlighted the fact that the work was not done, and that mine action was more relevant than ever. He noted that explosive ordnance remains a persistent and deadly threat to civilians, humanitarians and peacekeepers. The United Nations estimates that the presence of mines and other explosive ordnance poses a threat to at least 100 million people. From Gaza to Sudan, Syria, Somalia and beyond, millions remain in constant danger. Clearance efforts are slowed by protracted conflicts, access constraints or a lack of respect for international humanitarian law. The impact of war is compounded by the adverse effects of climate change, including by making areas contaminated with landmines inaccessible due to extreme weather events.

Mr Zouev then highlighted some points from Afghanistan, Colombia, Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Ethiopia, DRC and Sudan. He noted that in 2023 alone, United Nations programmes across 25 countries reported 3,237 casualties from IEDs, with 68% of the victims being civilians. Moreover, as the sophistication of IEDs increases, there is a shift from victim-operated to radio-controlled and unmanned aerial devices. Technical knowledge as well as movements of terrorist groups have passed relatively unhindered across porous borders and dense forests over the Sahel and coastal countries, further endangering civilians as well as national security forces across the region.

As a result, we are witnessing more remote and lethal attacks, often bypassing traditional detection methods. This makes our work more complicated and urgent than ever.

ASG Zouev then spoke about the work of UN mine action programmes, but noted the challenges when there were insufficient resources available to provide the necessary support. He noted that in the next six to nine months, funding shortages could lead to closures in UNMAS programmes in Afghanistan, Colombia, Ethiopia, Mali and Syria.

ASG Zouev concluded by saying that the continued support of the MASG was important to ;

- **reduce** the use of indiscriminate weapons,
- **promote** greater compliance with international legal and political instruments,
- **advocate** for and **provide** sufficient funding to respond to Member States' request for humanitarian mine action assistance,
- **develop** sustainable and accountable national mine action capacity, and
- **ensure** effective coordination of mine action actors to protect and assist victims, amongst other vulnerable groups.

The full statement by ASG Zouev can be found on the MASG website at the following link.

<https://www.mineaction.org/en/resources/documents/masg>.

## **2. BRIEFINGS: REGIONAL MINE ACTION**

### **2.1 Ukraine.**

**2.1.1 Switzerland.** Ambassador Adrian Hauri, the DPR of Switzerland to the United Nations in New York, was invited to update the meeting on the recent Ukraine Mine Action Conference -UMAC2024. Ambassador Hauri explained that the high-level meeting was co-hosted by Switzerland and Ukraine and was held in Lausanne from 17 to 18 October 2024. The theme of the conference was People – Partners – Progress. He noted that 51 countries participated in the meeting, along with 10 major international organizations and numerous representatives of civil society. Ambassador Hauri noted that huge numbers were involved when talking about Ukraine – both in terms of ERW contamination and in terms of resources needed to address the threat. The need for coordination of the mine action sector was important, as was the need for innovation and new technology. The human cost of the landmine problem was highlighted at the conference by a presentation from a mine victim, Mr Giles Duley. The outcome of the meeting was the Lausanne Call for Action which has been signed by 42 countries. The list of signatories is published on the Conference website. Further States wishing to support the Lausanne Call for Action can do so by writing to [umac2024@eda.admin.ch](mailto:umac2024@eda.admin.ch) Ambassador Hauri concluded by noting that the next expert-level meeting will be held from 7-8 April 2025 in Geneva and the next Ukraine Mine Action Conference would be in Japan in 2025.

**2.1.2 UNMAS Ukraine.** Mr Paul Heslop, the UNMAS Senior Mine Action Adviser to the UN Resident Coordinator in Ukraine then gave an update on the operational aspects of the problem. He stressed that unlike other mine action programmes that expressed their needs in tens of millions of dollars, in Ukraine we are talking billions of dollars. Mr Heslop said that it was not so necessary to define the type of demining needed in Ukraine eg humanitarian, economic, recovery, development, military,

etc but rather to get on with it. He said that mine action architecture in Ukraine is very complicated and complex, with 15 ministries involved, often with overlapping mandates. There were also 10 UN agencies, 10 other international organizations and 50 accredited organizations working in the sector. One of the key challenges was differentiating between land that was contaminated versus land that was thought to be contaminated. The latter was a huge perception problem and needed to be addressed. Ukraine needed to adopt an outcome driven and risk management approach to the issue, and 50% reduction in suspected hazardous areas had been achieved in the last 12 months using these approaches. Mr Heslop then outlined the major achievements and key challenges facing Ukraine. Mr Heslop closed by inviting the MASG to visit Ukraine or to hold local MASG-sponsored meetings in Kiev.

The power point presentations on Ukraine are available on the MASG website.

## **2.2 Gaza.**

**2.2.1. Mr Takuto Kubo.** Mr Takuto Kubo, the Chief of Programme Management and Support Section of UNMAS gave an overview of the current ERW situation in Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt). Mr Kubo had recently returned from a two-week mission to Jerusalem and Ramallah. Mr Kubo gave a timeline of UNMAS activities in the oPt and outlined the four-pillar approach taken by UNMAS. Currently UNMAS are undertaking EOD response tasks and UNICEF are providing EORE risk education services in Gaza. The latter was being hampered by the lack of internet and mass media channels to deliver safety messages. In the West Bank, UNMAS were supporting the Palestinian Authority Mine Action Centre with coordination and data management. UNMAS have a phased approach and are currently somewhere between the emergency response and early recovery phase. In practical terms, dealing with the management of debris was a huge problem, and other challenges included security, costs and access.

The power point presentations on Gaza is available on the MASG website.

## **2.3 Regional Overview Middle East – Lebanon, Syria, Yemen.**

**2.3.1 UNDP – Mr Steinar Essen.** Mr Steinar Essen, the Global Mine Action and Development Adviser, Crisis Bureau, UNDP said he understood the urgency of Ukraine and Gaza, but wanted to shed some light on other countries in the region that were on the brink of collapse ie Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. He started by saying that the extent of contamination in Syria was difficult to determine because of spillover from the conflict in Gaza and Lebanon. Mr Essen then outlined the work being undertaken by UNMAS and UNICEF and noted that mine action was a precondition to return and recovery. Some of the challenges in Syria include continued conflict with additional layers of EO contamination, unpredictable funding and limited mine action actors.

Mr Steve Robinson, the UNDP Mine Action specialist in the Crisis Bureau, UNDP New York spoke about Yemen as another 'forgotten conflict'. He said that landmines and UXO are impacting the humanitarian response in the country, for example during the recent floods. There are also high numbers of IDPs in affected areas. Mr Robinson advised that DRC, HALO Trust, HI and NPA are operating in the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG) areas; HI and ICRC are operating in the De Facto Authority (DFA) areas, and that operating space was workable but very challenging. He noted that the national demining actor, YEMAC N/S, lacks the necessary range of capacities and that

timely APMBBC compliance is unlikely. Finally, Mr Robinson said that UNOPS had completed the transitional ECHO-funded project, and the United Nations RC- HC has requested UNDP to resume as the substantive lead for mine action.

Mr Essen then spoke about Lebanon. He said that all mine action operations in the south of the country had been suspended in October 2023, and from 23 September 2024 they had been suspended country wide. By mid-October 2024 over 10,000 attacks had been recorded, mainly in the south, southern suburbs of Beirut and the Beqaa valley. This has led to many people being killed, injured or displaced, and damage caused to infrastructure like health centres and schools. Mine action officials have less understanding about the UXO threat due to the ongoing situation. Lebanon previously had one of the most effective mine action programmes in the world, and the government agency LMAC is still in the lead. Weekly coordination meetings are being held and the response will include tailoring EORE messages to the new threat, training and equipping survey and response teams, and establishing guidelines for debris management. Funding is needed now to prepare to respond quickly when the conflict ends.

**2.3.2 UNMAS – Ms Ilene Cohn.** The Director of UNMAS, Ms Ilene Cohn, added some comments about the situation in Syria and Lebanon. In Syria, Ms Cohn noted that UNMAS has had a presence in the country since 2018, and that there was a huge opportunity to do a lot. Most populated areas are affected by UXO, and the country has suffered some of the highest civilian casualty rates in the world. She stressed that mine action was an enabler for early recovery in Government controlled areas and that partners were waiting for resources. On Lebanon, Ms Cohn spoke about the work of UNIFIL, where UNMAS have a small QA team checking on the work of UNIFIL deminers. The work of UNIFIL south of the Litani river has been suspended and some UNIFIL positions have been targeted. It is expected that there will be increased UXO contamination in the UNIFIL AO, and UNIFIL will need an expansion of their EO capacity, along with other mine action capabilities. Overall, Ms Cohn noted that there may be a Security Council request to increase the mandate of UNIFIL, and on the mine action side she requested donor support for expanding the UNMAS QA capacity and support for NGOs working throughout the country.

**2.3.3 Discussion.** The Chair thanked the speakers for the useful presentations and said that Italy had been asking the Security Council for a new mandate for UNIFIL. The representative of UNOPS said that they were always ready to support the implementation of UN projects, stressing the need for good data gathering and information management to ensure outcome driven results. The representative of Germany asked about UNDP's role in capacity building in Yemen, and Mr Essen confirmed that this was to build government capacity to better manage mine action and was with both parties (noting that donors were unable to fund the Houthis).

The power point presentations on the Middle East are available on the MASG website.

## **2.4 Update on other countries with high casualty rates – Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan**

**2.4.1 UNICEF Mr Hugues Laurence.** The Child Protection Officer from UNICEF New York, Mr Hugues Laurence, gave an update on the situation in several other 'forgotten' countries, but where the civilian casualty numbers from landmine and UXO accidents were still high. Mr Laurence gave confirmed figures of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. He

reminded the meeting about a story in the NY Times of 9 June 2023 detailing a UXO accident in Somalia that killed 27 children. His common message was that the majority of UXO casualties in these countries were civilians, and of these, children were a high percentage of victims. On a more positive note, Mr Laurence said that it was possible for many of these countries to aim for a status of 'new casualty free' and cited the example of Sri Lanka where this had happened, despite existing contamination. He concluded by saying accident free was achievable by;

- Strong and transparent prioritization mechanisms
- Ongoing injury surveillance system
- Integration of quick response Clearance-EORE-Victim Assistance at scale
- Integration with other risk reduction strategies (e.g. livelihood support)
- Meaningful community engagement (and empowerment)
- Strong mobilization of institutions
- Affected areas are accessible

The power point presentation on 'Other Countries with High Casualties' is available on the MASG website.

### **3. BRIEFINGS: THEMATIC UPDATES**

**3.1.1 Adapting to Change – The Growing Need for Flexibility in Mine Action.** Mr Valon Kumnova, the Chief of Operations at the GICHD, gave a presentation on the need for mine action to adapt to change. Mr Kumnova started by explaining the changing nature of conflict and noted the rise in conflicts since 2012. He said that in 2024 there were 50 countries in conflict, and of these 30 had known landmine and UXO contamination. The nature of these conflicts included greater involvement of non-State actors, increasing civilian casualties, greater use of IEDs and protracted conflict. He then outlined the challenges to existing normative frameworks like conventions and stakeholder inflexibility. Mr Kumnova concluded by outlining some suggestions for the way forward, including complementary frameworks, rebranding mine action, promoting local ownership and embracing innovative solutions.

**3.1.2 Discussion.** The representatives of Italy, Switzerland, UNHCR and UNOPS asked questions about innovation, and the GICHD replied by saying that they had created an 'innovation hub' within the GICHD and that they would be arranging an innovation meeting in Luxembourg in mid-2025. Issues to be addressed will include climate change and the environment. The representative of the ISU APMBC noted that the conventions cannot address all issues, such as non-State actors and that the Convention has been able to respond when States Parties discover previously unknown or new landmine or cluster munition contamination. The representative of Canada noted that gender was a central pillar of their mine action response and stressed the need to collect disaggregated data.

A copy of the presentation by the GICHD is available on the MASG website.

#### **4. UPDATE FROM OBSERVERS**

**4.1 GICHD.** The new Director of the GICHD, Ambassador Tobias Privitelli, thanked the Chair for the warm welcome to his first MASG meeting, and said that he looked forward to continuing the close cooperation between the GICHD and the MASG. Ambassador Privitelli outlined the work that the GICHD had been doing in Ukraine over the past 18 to 24 months, which included helping to develop a national strategy, adapt national standards and support information management. In the next year the GICHD will assist with localization efforts, look at innovative financing and help the government implement the strategy. Mr Kumnova gave details of his recent trip to Afghanistan and said that despite there being good access throughout most of the country, many local organizations were on the brink of collapse due to lack of funding, like the Mind Dog Centre. The GICHD will assist with information management and standards but urged donors to engage directly with organizations to support lifesaving activities. A copy of the GICHD update is on the MASG website.

**4.2 ITF Enhancing Human Security.** Ambassador Tomaz Lovrencic, Director of the ITF, noted that victim assistance had not been mentioned during the meeting. He said that he had attended the Lausanne meeting for Ukraine and was pleased that victim assistance was mentioned in the Call for Action document. He reminded the meeting that the ITF supported activities for mine victims, such as sports and social activities. He said there has been good technological improvements in prosthetics, but these were expensive and donor support is needed to provide them to victims in poorer countries.

**4.3 OAS.** Mr Sergio Perez, from the Department of Public Security of the OAS gave an update on their work. He said that Colombia continues to demonstrate strong national ownership of its mine action program, now overseen by the Counselling Office Commissioned for Peace. The country has made notable progress, particularly in surveying and clearing mine-affected areas that are safely accessible. This effort has been strengthened by the adoption of a new national mine action standard, finalized in 2024 and titled "Humanitarian Demining in Areas with Security Instability Factors and Response to Specific Events." This standard is a significant step forward in improving access to unstable regions, enabling humanitarian mine action interventions in some of the most heavily impacted communities, and addressing contamination in areas where little information is available. There is now increased engagement with donors locally, and Colombia's three-year operational plan through 2025 includes specific land release targets by municipality and clearly defined outputs for non-technical survey (NTS), technical survey (TS), and clearance operations. The OAS continues to work with Ecuador and Peru to support both countries in their efforts to complete clearance of their shared border. Both countries are continuing to make progress, however, much needed resources to complete the work have not yet been forthcoming. Some smaller initiatives to carry out assessments of remaining areas, and to find ways of speeding up this work have been carried out, but the necessary operational resources and equipment remains. This key partnership could allow the completion of this demining work, and two more States Parties to the AP Mine Ban Convention to meet their Convention obligations. The OAS statement is on the MASG website.

**4.4 CISR JMU.** Ms Suzanne Fiederlein, Director of CISR, said that the latest edition of the Journal of Conventional Weapons had just been released, and the call for papers for the 2025 editions would be issued soon. She noted that next year would mark the 29<sup>th</sup> year of the Journal and that over the years it provided a useful opportunity for discussion on relevant topics in the mine action sector. Ms

Fiederlein thanked the US State Department PM WRA for their ongoing support.

<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/>

**4.5 ISU APMBC.** Mr Juan Carlos Ruan, Director of the ISU, APMBC gave a short update on the work of the Convention. The focus at present is on the 5<sup>th</sup> Review Conference, which is to be held in Siem Reap from 25 November. The Review Conference will provide three documents – a Review Document of the past 5 years, a Political Declaration and a Siem Reap Angkor Action Plan 2025 -2029. A second draft of the Action Plan will be available next week, and an on-line informal planning meeting will be held on 7 November. One focus will be on assisting smaller affected states to ‘finish the job’ – such as Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Peru, Ecuador and Mauritania. Mr Ruan encouraged donors to support this initiative, and the ISU is ready to support with information.

**4.6 Drumlanrig Group.** Mr Sebastian Kasack of MAG gave a statement on behalf of the Drumlanrig Group of mine action NGOs. NPA is currently the chair of the group, and it consists of DCA, DRC, the GICHD, The HALO Trust, HI, and MAG. Mr Kasack started by expressing the concern of the group over the worsening situation in Gaza and Lebanon, where the NGOs have had to suspend their activities. Mr Kasack said that it will take substantial and sustained international support to tackle the explosive ordnance resulting from Gaza, Lebanon and Ukraine; and of course, other ongoing humanitarian crises such as in Sudan, Ethiopia and Myanmar. He also encouraged the coordination of donor funding to ensure that lesser affected countries are not forgotten. He also stressed the importance of EORE as a means to reduce civilian casualties. Mr Kasack said their organizations were going to actively participate in the 5<sup>th</sup> Review Conference for the APMBC, and he also stressed the importance of all the conventional weapons treaties. He said that we must collectively—and with renewed vigour and commitment—champion, universalise, and implement these life-saving instruments. Mr Kasack concluded by saying they look forward to continuing and strengthened collaboration with MASG members and with other partners in the sector, as part of their collective endeavours to protect civilians. The Drumlanrig Group statement is on the MASG website.

## **5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS.**

**5.1 Other Business.** Ms Lucy Pinches from the Mine Action Review updated the meeting by advising that the latest Cluster Munition Review has just been launched, and the Landmine Action Review will be released on 12 November. The link to the MAR is <https://www.mineactionreview.org/>

**5.2 Next Chair of the MASG.** Ambassador Greco announced that the UK will take over the chair of the MASG for 2025 and 2026, and he introduced Ambassador David Riley of the UK who will take on the role as Chair. Ambassador Riley is the Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament at the UK Mission in Geneva. Ambassador Riley said that he was honoured to take on the role and noted that the UK has a long history in supporting mine action, and have always supported NGOs like HALO and MAG. Ambassador Riley said that his last post was in the FCDO in London leading the UK policy on Ukraine. He concluded by saying that he looked forward to working with other donors through the MASG over the next two years.

**5.3 Next MASG meeting.** The Chair said that the date for the next MASG meeting would be advised by the UK, but that following normal procedure it would most likely be held in the margins of the 28<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of National Mine Action Directors and UN Advisers (NDM-UN) to be held in Geneva from 9 April to 11 April 2025. Further details will be advised in due course.

## **6. MEETING CLOSE**

In closing, the Chair thanked MASG members and observers for their participation in the meeting, and the Italian Mission for their support in providing the room and Zoom link. He also thanked the USA for funding the post of MASG secretary, and thanked Mr Mansfield for his work in preparing the meeting. Ambassador Greco thanked all the presenters and speakers and said that the minutes of the meeting and the presentations would be made available shortly.

The meeting closed at 12.45 hours.