

MINUTES

MASG MEETING

TUESDAY, 24 OCTOBER 2023

PERMANENT MISSION OF ITALY TO THE UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK

1. OPENING REMARKS

1.1 Chair. The Chair of the MASG, Mr Lucio Demichele, opened the meeting at 09.30 hours and welcomed the 43 in-person participants to the meeting, along with the 21 people joining on-line. He then invited the Permanent Representative of Italy, HE Ambassador Maurizio Massari, to say some welcoming remarks.

1.2 Welcome by Ambassador Maurizio Massari, Italy. Ambassador Massari welcomed participants to the second MASG meeting of the year and emphasized the growing importance of collaborative efforts in undertaking humanitarian mine action. He noted that over the years the MASG has remained resolute in its commitment to mitigating the devastating impacts of landmines and other explosive remnants of war in conflict-affected regions around the world. He noted that the MASG needed to continue its engagement in humanitarian mine action not only through political will, but also through concrete contributions, with the ultimate goal of making the world a safer place for future generations. Ambassador Massari said that the ongoing crisis in the Middle East served as a stark reminder of the critical nature of donor countries' engagement and the increased significance of the work of the MASG. He stressed that the MASG must remain vigilant in continuing to address other situations, like Ukraine, and also countries like Syria and Colombia, which were on the agenda today.

Ambassador Massari then briefly outlined the work of Italy in mine action. He noted that in 2001 Italy had established a dedicated fund for mine action, and since that time Italy had contributed US\$79 million to nine programmes. Italy actively promoted advocacy for the APMBC and the CCM. Italy also collaborated with multi-lateral agencies and NGOs to deliver its programmes. Recently, Italy had engaged the GICHD to assist with developing an Italian Strategy for Mine Action 2023 – 2025.

In conclusion, Ambassador Massari said that Italy had been honoured to have assumed the chair of the MASG in 2023, and as per the Note Verbale that had been distributed, were willing to remain as chair in 2024. If this was to be the case, he would personally perform the function from the Mission in New York. Ambassador Massari then welcomed USG Jean-Pierre Lacroix of the Department of Peace Operations and invited him to address the meeting.

1.3 USG Jean-Pierre Lacroix, UN DPO. Mr Lacroix thanked Italy for being the chair of the MASG and said that he was pleased to address the meeting in his capacity as the Chair of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group of Mine Action (IACG-MA). He thanked all members of the MASG for their steadfast support. Mr Lacroix noted that the expertise of United Nations mine action actors is in growing demand and likely to increase. At present the United Nations supports many different

places, including Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Mali, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Ukraine. He then paid tribute to the exceptionally courageous mine action colleagues who continue to work in many, if not all, of the most dangerous places in the world.

On resource mobilization, Mr Lacroix said that many affected countries are struggling for funding. Although the daunting mine action requirements for Ukraine are reasonably well funded, other activities listed in various Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) face severe funding gaps. Out of a total appeal for US\$341 million in the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plans, the humanitarian community urgently needs US\$189 million to protect 74.5 million people from the risk of mines and explosive ordnance. Mr Lacroix referred to the details in an info-graphic sheet, which is attached to these minutes. As far as the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) funding needs are concerned, he appealed for more predictable, multi-year and flexible funding through the Voluntary Trust Fund for Assistance in Mine Action (VTF), to address significant humanitarian needs.

Mr Lacroix informed the meeting that the Secretary-General issued his latest report on assistance in mine action in August and its related resolution was successfully adopted by consensus in the Fourth Committee earlier this month. The resolution will be put before the General Assembly in December. Mr Lacroix was pleased that in this year's resolution Member States included language linking mine action with 'reducing the human cost of weapons', as outlined in the New Agenda for Peace. He noted the establishment of the Global Advocate for persons with disabilities in conflict, and the reinforcing of linkages between mine action and extreme weather events, climate shocks and the ability to cultivate land. He acknowledged the exceptional leadership of Poland in facilitating the resolution consultations successfully again this year on behalf of the European Union. Mr Lacroix then elaborated on three points in the resolution.

1. First, an unacceptable number of civilian casualties from explosive ordnance continue to be recorded.
2. Second, without a dramatic reduction in conflict, violence, and the spread of weapons, the 2030 Agenda will remain out of reach.
3. Third, the United Nations continues to operate in dangerous environments with high IED threats.

In concluding, Mr Lacroix outlined some of the achievements of the United Nations system in mine action over the past 12 months. He then said he looked forward to the 27th International Meeting of Mine Action National Directors and United Nations Advisers (NDM-UN) to be held next year in Geneva, from 29 April to 1 May 2024. He was pleased that UNMAS, on behalf of the IACG-MA, is continuing its partnership with the Geneva Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) to co-host and co-organize the meeting. He also expressed his gratitude to Switzerland for their generous support to the meeting. Finally, Mr Lacroix said that the United Nations is committed to working in partnership with the MASG to continue mine action efforts in an effective, cost-efficient, transparent, and accountable manner. In the current challenging geopolitical and economic environment, the United Nations counts on donor commitment and support to our efforts for a mine free world.

The full statement by USG Lacroix 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 Gaza.

2.1.1 UNMAS. Mr Takuto Kubo, the Chief of Programme Management and Support Section of UNMAS gave an overview of the current ERW situation in Gaza. He started by saying that at present UNMAS had one international staff member and 9 local staff located in the southern part of Gaza and that they were all safe. The staff had reported an increase in air strikes over the past few days. At the start of the conflict, they had managed to initiate an emergency explosive ordnance risk education campaign (EORE) via radio and SMS messages reaching over one million people, but these means of communications had now been knocked out. The staff are also conducting ERW risk assessments of UNWRA facilities whenever possible. UNMAS are establishing a small inter-agency coordination team at HQ and have extra field staff on stand-by to deploy when access becomes possible.

UNICEF reported that the hostilities directly threaten the lives and well-being of 1 million children in the Gaza Strip. The Gaza Ministry of Health reported Monday (23 Oct) that the number of children killed has passed 2,000; (5,087 total killed, including 2,055 children and 1,119 women). The level of destruction, including school damage, is massive. As of 21 October, 206 schools (39% of total schools) have sustained damage and many of these schools and others may be contaminated by ERW. UNICEF is planning to integrate EORE messaging into its various support messaging and distribute by whatever means are possible. In terms of immediate support, UNICEF is prioritizing cash and supply assistance to the most vulnerable. UNICEF has 33 staff in shelters in the area and has started assembling a surge capacity in Cairo. UNICEF also reported increased violence in the West bank and is currently working on an emergency preparedness plan. A copy of the UNICEF update is attached to these minutes.

2.2 Ukraine.

2.2.1. Mr Oleh Stoiev, Ministry of Economy, Ukraine. The Chair introduced Mr Oleh Stoiev, the Advisor on Mine Action in the Ministry of Economy of Ukraine. (who spoke via Zoom). Mr Stoiev thanked the donors for their support to Ukraine and then went on to outline the ERW problem in Ukraine. He said that nearly 3 million hectares of land were suspected hazard areas, and that the loss to the agriculture sector in Ukraine was in the order of US\$35 billion. He said that mine action was a priority for the government in the areas of infrastructure, agriculture, and the safety of civilians. He said that the government faced many challenges, including a complicated government structure, and challenges with tasking, prioritization, and coordination. However, he said that a process to develop a national strategy was underway and that it would provide a clear roadmap on vision and purpose, and define who, what and when. Mr Stoiev said that the key priorities would be returning land to productive use, preventing civilian accidents, and improving the national MA architecture. Finally, Mr Stoiev said that the government had established a sectoral working group for mine action, that involved government, UN and donor representatives.

2.2.2 UNDP Ukraine – Mr Paul Heslop. Mr Paul Heslop, the UNDP Programme Manager, then gave an update on the work of the United Nations. Mr Heslop said that up to 175,000 sq km may be affected by landmines and explosive ordnance. However, positive steps were being taken by the government, which included the development of a national strategy, the drafting of national standards, the establishment of the Sector Working Group, new technology being adopted and the acceptance of a risk management approach to the problem. He said that a two-track approach was being implemented – that is the need for high impact outcome driven mine action, and the adoption of a risk management approach. One of the key considerations was to use technology (satellites, drones, etc) to eliminate areas with no mines (estimated to be 70% of suspected areas), so that the priority for full clearance can be directed to confirmed mined/UXO areas. Mr Heslop then outlined the areas where the United Nations was helping, which included capacity development of national structures, information management, standards, quality assurance, training, technical assistance, and innovative financing. In conclusion. Mr Heslop said that the remainder of his slides outlined innovative funding options, and equipment lists linked to desired outcomes.

Discussion. The Chair noted the strong link between the need for mine action in Ukraine and global food security. He also appreciated the use of new technology being applied in Ukraine, and the possibilities it held for other mine action programmes. The representative of UNHCR said that mine action was central to their work on protection in Ukraine. He noted the high level of displacement within Ukraine, with an estimated 11 million people being internally displaced, and thus at a greater risk of mines and ERW. UNHCR have mainstreamed EORE into their programmes for shelter, rehabilitation, and return.

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

2.3 Syria.

2.3.1 UNMAS Syria – Mr Joe McCartan, Chief of Mine Action Programme. Mr McCartan said that the situation in Syria had stabilized since 2019, however the country was divided with the government controlling about 2/3rds of the area, with the remainder controlled by other groups. Five international countries still have military forces in the country, including Russia, Israel, Türkiye, USA, and Russia. The scope and scale of the explosive ordnance problem is not well defined, but it is estimated that there are over 30 EO incidents per day. Agricultural areas and access roads seem to be the most heavily contaminated. The UN mine action response takes a whole of country approach, with UNMAS leading coordination for the whole sector and in government-controlled areas, with HALO coordinating in the North-West and iMMAP in the Northeast. The Government of Syria recognize and welcome the UN mine action efforts, and UNMAS act as the de facto mine action centre, undertaking activities such as accreditation, quality assurance, risk education etc. The challenges faced include ongoing conflict, a lack of base-line contamination data, a lack of operators and unpredictable funding.

UNICEF is engaged in Syria with risk education and victim assistance programmes, and UNDP is active with five prosthetics workshops. As mentioned, HALO Trust act as the mine action coordinator in the Northwest of the country, and they have started clearance work in 2023. In the Northeast, coordination is provided by another NGO called iMMAP. Mr McCartan concluded by saying that most areas of the country are potentially contaminated with explosive ordnance, but that a nation-wide survey is needed. Mine action is clearly recognized as needed for support to early recovery.

Discussion. The representative of UNHCR confirmed that the lack of survey data was impeding their work, and that they had included questions about the presence of EO contamination in some of their own surveys. To date, they have conducted 16,000 surveys and they share the information with UNMAS. The representative of Germany asked about the setting of priorities for clearance in non-government areas, and what steps are taken to stop cleared land being misappropriated. Mr McCartan explained that under the new strategy, UNMAS works closely with other UN agencies to select and prioritize clearance tasks, eg with ILO for road clearance tasks and UNDP for rubble removal tasks. All current tasking in non-government areas is in support of other UN agencies. The Chair noted that in situations like Syria there is a trade-off between humanitarian needs and early recovery tasking, although Italy favored an early recovery approach. Mr McCartan said that Syria should move to an early recovery approach and gave the example that if they prioritized the clearance of water canals, they should soon be able to irrigate enough crops to feed their own population. However, after the recent earthquake some tasks had to be undertaken on an emergency/humanitarian basis.

The power point presentation on Syria is available on the MASG website.

2.4 Colombia

2.4.1 UNMAS Mr Pablo Parra and OAS Ms Tammy Hall. Mr Parra and Ms Hall gave a joint presentation about the situation in Colombia. Mr Parra started by saying that there had been 12,380 accident victims in Colombia since 1990. In 2006, the government made mine action a priority and set up a government agency – AICMA. Since then, there has been a downward trend in casualties, particularly after the signing of a peace agreement with FARC. Unfortunately, other armed groups are still using mines and new landmines casualties are being recorded in these areas – mainly civilians. Mr Parra also noted that Colombia was a major transit route for illegal migrants heading to the United States, which can also lead to increased casualties if agreed transit routes are not followed. As a result of this, Colombia will need to request an extension to its 2025 APMBC clearance deadline.

Ms Hall then gave an update on the work of the OAS. She explained that there were always challenges operating in a country with ongoing conflict, such as access to areas. The OAS monitors the work of the seven mine action operators working in-country and is in regular contact with the government about tasking and priorities. Information is key, but it is often difficult to obtain, or it is unreliable. Ms Hall then gave a detailed analysis of the efficiency of the clearance work. In essence, in Colombia there are lots of little minefields, and often clearance operators work in an area but find no mines. More effort needs to be put into non-technical and technical survey to ensure that

clearance assets are being used to full advantage. Ms Hall concluded by reinforcing that mine action in Colombia promotes peacebuilding, as well as improve economic possibilities.

Discussion. The Chair noted that Italy had recently approved guidelines promoting the triple nexus of peace, humanitarian activity and development, and that Colombia was a good example where this should be applied. The representative of UNHCR noted that of todays topics, Ukraine and Syria are the world's largest cases of externally displaced people, and Colombia has the largest internally displaced population. The main concern for UNHCR is the possibility of mines or closures of the Darien gap, leading from Colombia to Panama. Mr Parra said that meetings had been held with the government to ensure that migrant movements were controlled and that they were told to stick to established roads and tracks.

The power point presentation on Colombia is available on the MASG website.

3. BRIEFINGS: THEMATIC UPDATES

3.1 Poland. Report on the General Assembly Resolution on Assistance in Mine Action. The representative of Poland, Ms Karolina Krywulak, explained that the Resolution is negotiated and adopted every second year by the Fourth Committee. It is traditionally adopted by consensus. The main goal of the resolution is to express support for mine action efforts carried out by the UN community, member states, and other organizations all over the world. It is traditionally facilitated by Poland on behalf of the EU. This year's negotiations started on 27 September and after two weeks of consultations the delegations reached consensus on the draft resolution. The draft was approved, without a vote, by the Fourth Committee on 12 October. The resolution was co-sponsored by over 50 Member States.

Ms Krywulak said that the language in the Resolution had been strengthened this year and included.

- Reference to the impact of ERW on civilians.
- The threat posed by IEDs.
- The impact of ERW on land cultivation.
- Reference to reducing the human cost of weapons.

Additionally, the text refers to finding durable solutions to the following issues – the impact of weapons on refugees, persons with disabilities, extreme weather, and food security. Ms Krywulak concluded by thanking member states for their cooperation during the drafting process, and to UNMAS for their ongoing support.

The representative of the EU thanked Poland for their work in leading the process to have the Resolution adopted, and noted the close harmony between the Secretary Generals report and the GA Resolution helped to strengthen a unified response to the mine action among member states.

A copy of the statement by Poland is available on the MASG website.

3.2. GICHD – Innovation in Mine Action. Mr Valon Kumnova, the Chief of Mine Action Programmes at the GICHD gave a presentation on 'Innovation' in mine action. Mr Kumnova said that the GICHD looked at innovation in various ways – technological, methodological and through policy innovation.

He noted that some of the challenges to innovation were slow progress or the lack of a ‘silver bullet’, being able to demonstrate cost effectiveness when good base-line data was not available, the limited funding for innovation and resistance to change. Mr Kumnova then outlined the various ‘building blocks’ used at the GICHD to promote innovation, and outlined the current initiatives being undertaken at the GICHD. These included the idea of establishing an ‘Innovation Advisory Group’ and an ‘Innovation Hub’, holding an innovation workshop every two years and a specific thematic workshop every other year, and introducing an ‘Innovation Award’. Finally, Mr Kumnova mentioned the Innovation workshop being held by the GICHD in Geneva from 14 to 16 November 2023.

Discussion. The Swiss representative announced that Swiss government had recently approved a new four-year funding agreement for the GICHD, consisting of CHF9.4 million per year for 2024 to 2027. The funding was to support global activities, but it also included a specific contribution for Ukraine. The representative of the USA thanked the GICHD for taking the lead on Innovation. He noted that most donors were ‘program managers’ and that it is often hard for them to assess new technologies and sales pitches from manufacturers, and that this GICHD ‘Innovation Hub’ will assist donors to decide on new approaches or technologies. The Chair asked about the involvement of the private sector in the ‘Hub’. Mr Kumnova said that it was early days, but the intention was to involve private companies. He said that if innovation follows the needs, then all sides should benefit. He gave the example of drones for non-technical surveys. The development of drones was not so important as they were just the platform, it was the development of the sensor on the drone that was important.

The power point presentation on Innovation is available on the MASG website.

4. UPDATE FROM OBSERVERS

4.1 GICHD. Mr Kumnova gave a brief update on the work of the MASG, including their work in Ukraine, the upcoming Innovation conference, the launch of Iraq’s national mine action strategy, and finally a series of case studies looking at mine action and the triple nexus. The full GICHD statement is available on the MASG website.

4.2 ITF Enhancing Human Security. Ms Sabina Beber said that the ITF was currently active in 12 countries/areas: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Iraq, NE Syria (Clear and Grow program), Lebanon, Libya, Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Gaza Strip and West Bank. In Northeast Syria the ITF is supporting a local NGO, with French funding support. In Ukraine, the ITF had just reopened their office and their work has a focus on victim assistance and capacity building. Ms Beber said that the ITF was focussed on helping Bosnia Herzegovina meet their APMBC completion target in the next 5 years. She also urged MASG members not to forget smaller countries who need a little assistance to meet their clearance obligations. Finally, Ms Beber thanked the donors who continuously support ITF activities – USA, Slovenia, Republic of Korea, Austria, France and the EU.

4.3 OAS. The representative of the OAS at the meeting, Mr Steven Griner, said that the goal of the OAS remained a mine free hemisphere, and only Colombia, Peru and Ecuador had a remaining EO contamination problem. Mr Griner outlined the challenges and progress in Peru and Ecuador and

noted that both had APMBC clearance deadlines due in the next two years. The OAS is holding a hybrid meeting on 16 December in Washington to discuss these two countries.

4.4 CISR JMU. Ms Heather Holsinger from the Centre for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR at James Madison University (JMU) said that the most recent issue of the Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction 27.3 had just been released. The on-line version is available at <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/> and the paper copies will be posted this week. The call for papers for the next edition has been issued and readers are encouraged to submit articles. JMU also produce the publication titled 'To Walk the Earth in Safety' for the US State Department, and copies of the latest edition were available in the room.

4.5 ISU APMBC. An update from the Implementation Support Unit of the APMBC is available on the MASG website.

4.6 Drumlanrig Group. Mr Whatley spoke on behalf of the major international demining NGOs. He said that all the NGO shad experienced a reduction in funding for their mine action activities – except for Ukraine. He expressed appreciation for the MASG and said that it was an excellent forum for NGOs to present their focus on priority countries. He indicated that the sector needs to keep in mind affected countries like Lebanon, Libya, Myanmar, Syria, and Zimbabwe.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS.

5.1 Other Business. None.

5.2 Next Chair of the MASG. The meeting confirmed the proposal that Italy continue as chair of the MASG for a second year into 2024, noting that the position of chair will move to Ambassador Massari at the Permanent Mission of Italy to the UN, New York.

5.3 Next MASG meeting. The Chair said that the next MASG meeting would be held in the margins of the 27th annual meeting of National Mine Action Directors and UN Advisers (NDM-UN) to be held in Geneva from 29 April to 1 May 2024. Further details will be advised in due course.

6. MEETING CLOSE

Before closing the meeting, the Chair invited the Director of UNMAS, Ms Ilene Cohn to say a few words. Ms Cohn thanked the chair for arranging an interesting and relevant meeting. She also appreciated the news that Italy would retain the chair of the MASG for another year, and she looked forward to working closely with Ambassador Massari in New York. Ms Cohn noted that although the focus of the MASG was on donor funding and coordination, she encouraged the group to provide advocacy and political support and to take advantage of the Italy's role in the 5th Committee and other fora to promote mine action in general.

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. Mr Demichele 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 12.15 hours.