



**Keynote Address by Ms. Ilene Cohn, Officer-in-Charge,
United Nations Mine Action Service
Persevering through a Pandemic
Conference on Humanitarian Mine Action:
Innovations and Strategies in Humanitarian Mine Action**

**hosted by the German Federal Foreign Office (Virtual)
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Good morning/afternoon Director General,

Dear colleagues and friends.

I would like to thank the Government of Germany, Director General Sorg and Director Bindseil for inviting the United Nations Mine Action Service to participate in this year's conference on "Innovations and Strategies in Humanitarian Mine Action". I would also like to echo Ms Sorg's condolences to NPA for the loss of two colleagues in the Solomon Islands.

When we met in Berlin at this same time last year we could not have predicted that *persevering through a pandemic* would be our opening theme in a virtual meeting in 2020.

But we are not surprised at the determination of the Federal Government of Germany to bring us together to celebrate the resilience of the humanitarian mine action sector. And we are not surprised either that our colleagues living and working in mine and ERW-affected communities have shown resilience and dedication while facing lengthy quarantines, uncertainty about their next visit to their family and concerns about access to healthcare – on top of the already appreciable level of stress they routinely tolerate.

In March and April as reports of COVID-19 cases were confirmed around the world and our work ground to a halt in some places, the humanitarian mine action community began to grapple with how to deliver mine action without exposing our beneficiaries and ourselves to the virus.

I'd like to share what we are learning as we confront the challenges presented by COVID-19.

I. COVID-19: resilience and challenges

The first lesson is about the adaptability of the sector

Humanitarian mine action has adapted to circumstances characterized by uncertainty and rapidly changing guidelines and restrictions. In Iraq, training for national mine action authorities on quality management, delivered in partnership with the UN assistance mission in Iraq, was converted into an e-training course. In Gaza and the West Bank, ERW risk awareness sessions were adapted to include WHO awareness information and videos on COVID prevention, reaching thousands of people. Despite restrictions in Colombia, our programme continued to provide virtual technical assistance to the National Mine Action Centre and other state agencies to facilitate risk education, victim assistance and humanitarian demining in 13 of the most mine-affected departments of Colombia. In Sudan,

we overcame restrictions on public gatherings by using loudspeakers mounted on vehicles to deliver risk education to roughly 50,000 individuals, and to also provide personal hygiene materials, such as soap and masks, as well as COVID-19 prevention materials to villages in remote areas.

Consultation with humanitarian and other partners was essential to the ability to adapt. As Chair of the Mine Action Area of Responsibility within the Global Protection Cluster, UNMAS shared information and guidance prepared by the Global Health Cluster on COVID-19 with our mine action partners and in-country coordinators. We also worked closely with other coordination forums, including the Explosive Ordnance Risk Education Advisory Group chaired by UNICEF and MAG. From Libya to Syria, Mali to Nigeria, we sought to integrate risk education into humanitarian response planning. Consultation and integration enabled mine action programmes to reduce an **expanded array** of risks to communities.

The second lesson learned relates to the role of technology and innovation

Before this pandemic, mine action was leveraging technological innovations. For example, our programme in Iraq had begun to use virtual reality goggles to train humanitarian workers on explosive risks. Risk education in Afghanistan had been adapting to new formats, including social media. In Mali, our programmes had begun to study the use of unmanned aerial vehicles in detecting improvised explosive devices.

COVID-19 simply sped up the process. Lockdowns and restrictions on in-person outreach led our programmes to increase reliance on technology. In Syria, we launched an SMS risk education campaign. And, in Nigeria, we worked with the *Education in Emergencies Working Group*, which brings together NGOs, UN agencies, academics, and other partners, to incorporate risk messaging in an online curriculum that ensures children are not left more exposed to risk just because they are not in school.

We have learned much about the utility of technology in reaching affected communities. But, social media or online training are not a silver bullet. Particularly when billions of people remain without internet access - with women less likely to have access than men. Given a heavier dependence on radio broadcasting to deliver risk education in Afghanistan, we conducted impact surveys to make sure our messages were reaching the most vulnerable. But these are relatively new delivery systems and we need to adapt our M&E mechanisms to make sure we are reaching the right people.

The third lesson I wish to highlight is one of resilience

The confusion and uncertainty of the past six months have exacted a personal toll. Yet, they have resulted in inspiring stories of human resilience. I will share three of them today.

Roshan Christy, from Sri Lanka, works for an UNMAS implementing partner in Abyei. Because of COVID-19, he had been unable to leave his duty station to return home to his wife and children. But he says he is proud to ensure that thousands of men, women, boys and girls in the Abyei area can safely travel to work and school. Then there is Khairaddin Jalali, who works as a risk educator in Herat, on the border between Afghanistan and Iran. He says that wearing a mask is difficult, and that he is worried about his health, but he alone delivered risk education messages to 25,000 returnees between January and July 2020. Ummetha, a deminer funded by UNMAS, was locked down in a camp in the Sahara desert due to COVID-19. She and her colleagues had to ration food to make sure their supplies would last until their next shipment. Yet, not long after that period, she was eager to recommence operations.

These are some of the many people who kept mine action going when the world was shutting down. Thanks to many donors, we managed to maintain our grants and contracts that sustained these essential staff **and their families**. We know that donors are bracing themselves for financial turmoil and that the demand for humanitarian funds is mounting. We are counting on the sustained support of mine action donors to sustain the hard-won gains in this sector.

Fourth: The Importance of data

While more time is needed to assess and analyze the longer-term impact of the virus, our data indicates that the majority of our mine action programmes continued unchanged or with operational adjustments through the pandemic. As of mid-May, roughly half of mine action activities funded by UNMAS remained fully operational; a third had experienced operational changes; and some 10% had been temporarily suspended while maintaining partial operational support. We also pooled data from UNDP and UNICEF – creating a cross-UN dashboard of programme implementation available to partners throughout the pandemic. This year, UNMAS also launched an interactive dashboard of data collected to gauge progress towards the objectives in the United Nations Mine Action Strategy 2020-2023.

Disaggregation of data by gender further enhances our capacity for targeted interventions.

We plan to use our 2020 data collection to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on UN mine action.

Fifth: The link between COVID-19 and instability and/or conflict

The Security Council has discussed the link between the virus and instability and we have witnessed this in our own work. Reports from Yemen point to increased levels of civil unrest related to the pandemic. In Colombia, non-state armed actors wishing to strengthen territorial control have imposed their own lockdowns and restrictions, killing civilians who don't play by the rules. In the Sahel, our personnel have warned of COVID-19 providing new opportunities for terrorist groups, including those with intentions to attack humanitarian or peacekeeping personnel.

Many contexts in which we work are struggling simultaneously with the virus and with the spreading and evolving use of improvised explosive devices. UNMAS is spearheading a multi-pronged response to IEDs. We are educating humanitarian workers in Nigeria and internal security forces in Burkina Faso on the risks of IEDs; we are providing pre-deployment and in-theatre training to UN peacekeepers in Mali and AU contingents in Somalia; all in support of the Secretary-General's Action for Peacekeeping agenda.

Finally: partnership and collaboration

Mine action is both an enabler and an end in itself. There is growing acknowledgment of the contribution that mine action makes to conflict prevention, sustaining peace, development and human rights. From Colombia to Cyprus, mine action has enabled trust-building in post-conflict communities. In peace operations, mine action helps to extend state authority, enable security services to protect civilians and reduce the illicit flow of weapons and ammunition.

What's more, humanitarian mine action can spur sustainable development. It clears land for infrastructure, education and agriculture and it creates alternative pathways for the economic participation of women. Our work creates fertile ground for the achievement of all 17 SDGs. And, it can be a driver of inclusion, particularly for persons with disabilities.

This pandemic has shed light on the particular vulnerabilities of person with disabilities in times of crises, making a human rights-based approach to our work crucial.

Partnership and collaboration across sectors, with regional organizations, international financial institutions and NGOs are essential to maximize the potential of humanitarian and development assistance in complex crises and conflicts.

Dear colleagues, friends,

I hope that these observations contribute to today's discussion.

I want to again thank Germany for convening us today. This gathering is a reflection of our ability to innovate, adapt and stay the course.

Thank you.