

Written evidence from Mines Advisory Group (MAG) (MYA0037)

Summary

- The situation in Myanmar combines extensive legacy contamination of landmines and explosive weapons with several additional risk factors. These include the ongoing and increasing displacement of civilians across contaminated areas (where in many cases there is a shortage of up to date survey data); the likelihood of new use of these weapons; and the difficulty of carrying out humanitarian aid delivery without mine action having taken place.
- The UK Government has an important role to play in addressing these issues. Using its global diplomatic influence, the UK should provide impetus for international and UN action, to show support for those working to restore democracy within Myanmar.
- The Government should also step up support for civil society organisations working to promote peace and provide humanitarian support; and bear in mind the need to resume mine action activities as soon as possible, to reduce the terrible cost to civilians of landmines and other explosive remnants of conflict.

About Mines Advisory Group (MAG)

1. MAG is a non-governmental organisation headquartered in Manchester with more than 5,000 staff worldwide. Our mission is to create safe futures for people affected by violence, conflict, and insecurity by destroying landmines, unexploded ordnance, and surplus weapons and ammunition.

2. MAG is committed to advocacy that prevents future harm caused by conflict. We were co-recipients of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for our work in support of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. We also support governments to meet their obligations under other instruments of international humanitarian law, such as Convention on Cluster Munitions, and the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

MAG's work in Myanmar

3. The UK Government has supported MAG's work in Myanmar through the Global Mine Action Programme (GMAP), which since 2017 has funded a consortium of three non-governmental organisations (MAG, the HALO Trust, and Norwegian People's Aid) to conduct humanitarian mine action in 11 countries, along with activities in a further four countries through the United Nations. Future funding for the programme is likely to be reduced by around 50% due to ongoing reductions in the UK aid budget, although the specifics of what will and will not be supported is still being worked out in detail.

4. MAG is the largest humanitarian mine action organisation working in Myanmar, and has been active there since November 2013. MAG conducts humanitarian mine action operations in five of Myanmar's states and regions: Kachin, Shan, Kayah, and Kayin States, and Tanintharyi Region. Since November 2020 we have operated in Chin state, and we have also been invited to carry out work in Rakhine where the number of accidents is on the rise.

5. To date, MAG and its implementing partners have visited and surveyed over 3,000 villages and delivered almost 3,500 explosive ordnance risk education sessions to over 115,000 direct beneficiaries in Myanmar. MAG teams have surveyed and mapped more than 250 hazardous areas in Myanmar, totalling over 14.6 km². Despite the country being so heavily mined, prior to MAG carrying out this work, details of contamination and its impact was solely anecdotal. This survey data represents a huge step forward not only for mine action, but in the planning and safe delivery of broader humanitarian and development activities.

6. While several organisations – MAG included – have carried out survey work over the past years, this work is incomplete, so the full picture of contamination is not known; and there has been no permission from Government to carry out clearance operations since MAG began operating in Myanmar in 2013. The ability of MAG, and other humanitarian groups, to operate across Myanmar has been seriously affected by the military coup and the ensuing civil unrest. As unrest escalated during February and March, MAG and its partners stood down operations to ensure the safety of staff. We are now working to ensure we continue to reach mine-affected communities, many of whom are even more acutely marginalised as a result of the political situation.

Use of landmines and explosive ordnance in Myanmar

7. While the current crisis in Myanmar has focused attention on the risks to civilians from conflict within the country, the fact is that civilians in Myanmar were already at severe risk of injury and death due to the remnants of previous conflicts in the form of landmines and other explosive devices. Myanmar has one highest landmine-related casualty rates in the world; in 2019, there were at least 358 casualties from mines and other explosive remnants of war. 90 townships (out of a total of 325), in 10 out of 14 states and regions, are believed to suffer from some degree of mine contamination - primarily antipersonnel landmines.

8. Myanmar is also one of the only states in the world that continues to use landmines, year after year. Specifically, there have been widespread reports since 2017 of use of landmines in Rakhine State, part of a wider pattern of military brutality against Rohingya Muslims. [According to the Landmine Monitor](#), the Government of Myanmar produces its own fragmentation, bounding and blast antipersonnel landmines. Myanmar is [not a state party](#) to either the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention or the Convention on Cluster Munitions.

9. Non-state actors in the country also continue to use explosive ordnance, including improvised devices. Anti-personnel landmines remain a common feature of armed conflict in Myanmar, meaning that an escalation in the current situation may well lead to new use. In a country where over 70% of the population relies on subsistence agriculture, explosive ordnance negatively impacts livelihoods and the prospects of economic development. Despite widespread contamination stemming from over seven decades of internal conflict, humanitarian clearance is not currently permitted in the country – this has been the case for over a decade, not only during the recent conflict.

10. In recent years, strong civil society advocacy in cooperation with the international community, including the UK, led to dialogue and progress towards clearance; it was this advocacy that allowed MAG's survey work, referenced above, to take place. The situation has deteriorated in recent years, but this demonstrates that progress is possible when effort is applied in a coordinated way.

Risks to civilians

11. As well as the obvious impact to operations, the conflict is already giving rise new movements of refugees and IDPs, such as to people fleeing into eastern borderlands in Kayin, Kachin and Chin states. As ever when people are on the move across conflict-affected areas, they are at increased risk from landmines; this is even more the case in Myanmar, where landmines and other explosive devices have been used so intensively by multiple actors in conflicts going on over the past several decades. Some of the densest contamination is along the eastern border with Thailand in Kayin State, Kayah State, and Tanintharyi Region. These areas are primarily non-government controlled – meaning that they are the areas that frightened civilians are most likely to flee to when seeking

safety. Unfortunately, this puts them at increased risk from mines and unexploded ordnance, due to both a lack of knowledge about this issue, and a lack of other choices.

12. This risk will be compounded if governments of bordering countries attempt to return refugees, or prevent them from crossing borders. According to the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, one of the minimum standards for safe, voluntary and dignified return is physical safety, which includes the absence of danger from landmines and Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) in return and resettlement sites.

13. Case study – the impact of mines on IDPs in Myanmar

Nawng Hkung* and his family fled from their home in the village of Ding Ga Yang in October 2012, following the breakdown in the ceasefire between the Tatmadaw and the KIA. They have spent almost eight years living in an IDP camp, where they face many challenges in their daily lives. To supplement his family's income, Nawng Hkung returns to his village from time to time to grow crops on their land and hunt animals in the forest. Each time he returns, he puts himself at risk. The local community in Ding Ga Yang suspect that there are contaminated areas around their village, especially on a nearby mountain where conflict has taken place in the past.

On 29 March 2020, Nawng Hkung and his son visited their hill farm to clear their land for new crops. While they were laying traps to hunt animals, they stepped on a landmine. Both of them sustained serious injuries to their legs and stomach, requiring hospitalisation.

Nawng Hkung hopes to return to his village and live in peace one day: "In order for us to return to our homes safely, it is necessary for landmine clearance to take place, and for us to receive education about the threat of landmines".

* Name has been changed for confidentiality reasons

Recommendations for the UK Government

14. The UK Government has recently set out, in the Integrated Review, an approach to its foreign policy positioning which includes a shift towards the 'Indo-Pacific'; a renewed focus on addressing conflict; and more broadly a desire to position itself as a 'soft power superpower'. If it is to succeed in these aims, it must do everything in its power to help to bring an end to the conflict in Myanmar, and minimise the humanitarian suffering of its people.

15. The UK is well positioned to make an impact. As well as being a member of the United Nations Security Council and that body's Penholder on Myanmar, it has also taken up a position as an ASEAN Dialogue Partner. The UK has further influence to draw on in the form of its long-term history of development support to the country and region. Sanctions enacted thus far are seen by humanitarian actors in the country as a positive step, although the impacts are not yet clear. However, it is vital that diplomatic, global-level action such as the implementation of sanctions is accompanied by ground-level support for civil society within Myanmar.

16. MAG's recommendations to the UK Government are as follows:

- It is important that the UK not only **shows its support for those working to restore democracy**, and condemns the indiscriminate use of weapons; but also that it uses its position on the global stage to **rally other countries to do likewise** – for example, in its role

as host of the 2021 G7 Summit, and as it takes up the presidency of the Convention on Cluster Munitions for the first time later this year.

- The Government must also use its diplomatic influence to **work closely with neighbouring countries, in particular Thailand**, to ensure that those fleeing the situation in Myanmar are able to seek safety and are not returned to risk repression, violence, or injury from explosive weapons. **Diplomatic efforts should also where possible be accompanied by funding and other support** to relevant governments and aid agencies so that refugees are able to receive adequate support.
- Humanitarian actors, as well as ordinary citizens, in Myanmar look to the UN Security Council to take a range of actions to address the conflict and its impacts – such as targeted economic sanctions and enacting a comprehensive global arms embargo. As UN Security Council Penholder on Myanmar, the UK should consider an Emergency Special Session to **strengthen the international response to human rights abuses and breaches of international humanitarian law** by the Myanmar military.
- The Government should reconsider its decision to [reduce the funding available](#) for peacebuilding and humanitarian work in Myanmar. Now is the moment to **step up support to ameliorate human suffering and send a clear message of solidarity**. Without this practical support, the Government's intention to promote democratic values as set out in the Integrated Review risks ringing hollow before the ink has dried.
- Once the current conflict is over, many previously surveyed areas will need to be surveyed again; there will be an increased need for landmine risk education; and, once permission is granted, work to clear landmines from the country will be significant and long-lasting. **Given its strong recent history in the field of mine action, the UK would be well-placed to effectively support this work** in the future – both through advocacy to seek permission for work to take place, and through providing funding for survey, risk education and landmine clearance activity when it becomes possible.

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