Back to basics for Sri Lanka's 'mine sweepers'

In a remote sun-baked corner of northern Sri Lanka, farmers are pioneering an unlikely new weapon in the fight to clear hundreds of thousands of landmines strewn during two decades of civil war.

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Across a no-man's land littered with mines, small groups of Sri Lankan soldiers lie on their chests, prodding the ground gingerly and scanning with costly metal detectors.

But in what is left of the tiny village of Thadduvankoddy, bang on the forward defence lines of Sri Lanka's notorious Tamil Tiger rebels, deminers don flak jackets, protective helmets and visors -- and grab a common-or-garden plastic rake.

Former British paratrooper Luke Atkinson, who is training farmers -- some likely rebel cadres -- to reclaim mined land abandoned years ago, hopes the new method he has introduced will revolutionise demining.

"The unique aspect of (our) clearance in Sri Lanka is the fact that we do not use a metal detector," said Atkinson, who heads a demining programme run by humanitarian group Norwegian People's Aid. "Sri Lanka is a small island, and decades of ethnic violence have left the place cut with metal. "So we have introduced a very simple, sustainable method, that we call the rake method," he added. "There's a heavy rake -- more like a plough. The other one is a light rake, like a thing you use on Sunday afternoons in the garden."

Yards away, his team of farmers turned deminers -- all from the local Tamil community in and around the northern rebel stronghold of Kilinochchi -- sweep away mines by using the rakes to excavate the sandy ground and expose them.

Second nature

From a distance, the deminers look as though they are simply tending crops. But strewed along the narrow approach tracks cordoned off by yellow tape are skull-and-crossbone danger signs that hint at a sinister harvest.

"I have been used to this kind of work before ... this is similar to tools used in the fields," said 24-year-old Ponnuthurai Kandipu, who belongs to the rebel-controlled Humanitarian Demining Unit, clasping his green plastic rake.

"There is a little fear in my heart," he said. "But I feel safer using this equipment."

Low equipment costs -- the rakes cost just a couple of dollars each -- means donor aid can be used to employ more deminers, speeding clearance.

The 500-strong Humanitarian Demining Unit has removed nearly 19,000 mines since the government and rebels agreed to a ceasefire in 2002 -- and hopes to clear all the main populated areas in the war-ravaged north by the end of 2006.

Only one a rake has detonated mine so far, but even then it caused only scratches and ringing ears thanks to the long reach of the rake -- and the nature of the mines being cleared.

The vast majority of up to a million mines the army laid across northern Sri Lanka during the 1980s and 1990s are so-called blast mines from Pakistan and China, which focus the explosive blast on the foot of the immediate victim.

Most were laid in Jaffna in the far north, and along the main A9 road that runs south through Kilinochchi.

There are few of the deadlier fragmentation mines -- used widely in Kosovo, Mozambique and Angola -- which send shrapnel spinning in a much wider radius and can kill or maim several people in one go.

Low-Tech A Blessing

Any home-made wooden box mines planted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam during their bloody war for autonomy that killed more than 64,000 people and drove hundreds of thousands more from their homes, are largely obsolete because the batteries inside have long since gone flat.

"Thank God the army didn't go to the former Yugoslavia to purchase mines, because then you'd have hundreds of injuries here," Atkinson said. Thanks to widespread awareness and cartoon signs warning of mines, accidents are rare.

Atkinson came up with the raking technique while demining in Kosovo. One of his team was clearing away leaves near a clearance site with a rake and swept up a stray mine that had been missed.

"So we set up a rake team, and found that a team of five men could clear a minefield in two weeks as opposed to a 40 man detector team that can do it in five months," he said.

The discovery was only made at the end of the Kosovo operation, so Atkinson decided to implement the method in Sri Lanka and hopes to take it to Sudan next.

Deminers have been fortunate -- the army kept good records of minefields it laid and have handed them to a cluster of non-governmental organisations helping remove them. The Tigers have been more reticent.

But the fact the rebels are allowing their defence lines to be cleared also bodes well for chances of turning the two-year truce into a permanent peace, despite inflammatory rhetoric on both sides.

"Our commitment to the peace process is clearly demonstrated in our commitment to free the lands from deadly mines for the people to resettle," Tiger political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan said in a recent interview.

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