



Opening Remarks

Individualized Approach - Mine Action Programme of Sri Lanka:
Status and Challenges in Implementation

by

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Madam Vanessa Wiley, Chair of the Committee,

Mr. P. Suresh, Secretary to the Ministry of Resettlement and Rehabilitation and National Director of the Sri Lanka Mine Action Centre,

Distinguished participants,

It is my pleasure today to address this meeting on “Individualized Approach - Mine Action Programme of Sri Lanka: Status and Challenges in Implementation”.

I am pleased to welcome the representatives of our partner countries and partner organisations to this important event. The presence of the officials of the Convention Implementation Support Unit who have made this event a reality through meticulous planning and follow up, is very comforting. My special thanks go to HRH Prince Mired Raad Zeid Al-Hussein, UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy on Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, for his inspiring video message to this event. His words represent an important authoritative assessment of the mine action progress in Sri Lanka, following his visit to the country in March 2018.

Distinguished participants,

It is your support, cooperation and understanding that have helped Sri Lanka to achieve success in what was considered a perilous task that we have taken upon ourselves over the years in the North and East of the country. Your participation today is specially encouraging as we address the remaining challenges in the ongoing de-mining activity which we expect to complete by 2020 - an ambitious, yet plausible target.

Madam Chair,

Sri Lanka’s mine action experience has proved to be both complex and unique. Its complexity extends beyond just the physical landscape, namely the vast areas of habitation turned into abandoned lands over 30 years of fighting. The armed conflict also ripped apart the social fabric that existed for centuries – one with its own specificities and cultural markers. Non-availability of mapping of mines and marking of areas where land mines were laid by the non-state actor in the conflict, added further to the challenge.

It was unique at the same time in several ways. The mine action initiative was launched in the North and East of the country in 2002. During this period and a few years immediately thereafter, with the continuation of the de-mining work, a process of rehabilitation and resettlement was underway. Between 2005 and 2009 even as the armed conflict intensified, the mine action programme driven by the Sri Lanka Army continued, in the midst of the intensity and ferocity of the violence and terrorism that occurred. In our view, the tremendous amount of work that was done on the ground, paving the way for the release of lands and resettlement of affected persons, makes the case of Sri Lanka distinct from other situations that experienced similar challenges.

The armed conflict came to an end in May 2009, but it left in its trail vast extents of land contaminated with landmines and explosive remnants of war. If contemporary experiences in other situations, including the Balkan Region, were to be any guide, it would be quite logical that de-mining in Sri Lanka would take a minimum of 20 – 25 years from 2009 onwards. In fact, some of the multilateral agencies that had been approached for help, had suggested it would take two decades or so, to complete de-mining.

It was against this backdrop, I should state, that the National Mine Action Centre, supported by partner countries and partner organisations, as well as the Sri Lanka Army was able to microscope the programme into something of a lesser duration as we witness today.

It stands to the credit of the Government of Sri Lanka and the partner countries and partner organisations, that we now remain hopeful of completing mine action by 2020. We do not believe in self-congratulation, though.

Madam Chair,

It is by no means a small measure that the Government of Sri Lanka committed substantial funds to sustain the programme throughout the years, with adequate provision of human resources as well. This has led to capacity building, predictability and sustainability of operation, and consolidation of the gains made. Confidence in our ability to assume and fulfil international obligations relating to mine action, as manifested in Sri Lanka's accession last December, to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, has grown, delivering a further dividend of public trust necessary for advancing reconciliation.

The continuing progress on the mine action front demonstrates three salient priorities, which in our view constitute the main plank of the Government's policy, strategy and vision for a country at peace with itself:

First, Sri Lanka has implemented and continues to implement a rehabilitation and resettlement programme, which has ensured the return of displaced persons to the cleared areas through an accelerated process of peacebuilding and development. Livelihood support and sustainable reintegration remain at the heart of this programme.

Second, the Government of Sri Lanka has adopted a comprehensive policy for addressing conflict-induced and long term displacement, which is being implemented with vigour.

Third, the Government has launched the National Human Rights Action Plan 2017- 2021, which, among other things, provides a policy framework for effectively addressing issues related to IDPs, as well as the return of lands. Other important steps taken include, the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016.

All these and several other initiatives taken by the Government coalesce into a national programme of reconciliation, which is being actively pursued, bringing all communities together on a platform of peacebuilding and inclusive development. The National Policy on Reconciliation, and co-existence, in place in Sri Lanka since 2017, which is among the important policy priorities of the Government, both underpins and nourishes the ongoing programmes.

Last, but not least while Sri Lanka makes steady progress towards the goal of mine free status by 2020, we would also be able to share our knowledge and expertise with others who are engaged in mine action programme in different regions.

We are confident the collective efforts would help realize the SDGs while fulfilling the objectives of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.

I thank you, Madam Chair.