

The Sacred Task of Demining Mozambique

by Ted Warnock

For almost five centuries, the people of Mozambique lived as a Portuguese colony. In 1975, after years of conflict, they won independence from Portugal. For the next 17 years, their newly gained independence was marred by acts of war and terror for control of what kind of new government should lead the people. Weapons of many types were obtained and used to achieve the ultimate goal of control. Daily life was difficult and personal freedoms were challenged because hundreds of thousands of landmines were planted around wells, roads, railroads, schools, and other areas of community importance. The landmines resulted in displaced families, abandoned farms, refugees, thousands of lives lost, and untold numbers of children and adults disfigured or maimed. For close to two decades, this prolonged civil war also hindered the new independent Mozambican government and its people from growth and development.

In 1989, Mozambique adopted a new constitution that prepared the country for a multiparty election process. In 1992, a United Nations peace agreement was negotiated with the rebel forces to end the fighting. This was not, however, the end of the struggles that the Mozambican people would have to endure. One lasting instrument of the civil war remains—landmines. Finding and removing them is one of the final battles that the government continues to fight to gain independence for all its people.

“My Efforts Were Important”

The United Methodist Church has signed agreements with several organizations to provide specially trained Mine Detection Dogs (MDDs), Agri-flail specialized machinery use, and a working relationship with the Accelerated Demining Program to detect and remove landmines in Mozambique. The results of the efforts have been significant! The Agri-flail removes vegetation and clears land in excess of 4000 square meters every day.

A member of Ashburn United Methodist Church in Ashburn, VA, went to Mozambique with me this year: Donnie Schoenmann. He and I met last year while



*Agri-flail machines, modified agricultural tractor frames, were developed to absorb explosions of mines planted .8 of an inch underground. The use of these new machines, in addition to the arrival of the dog teams, has more than doubled the rate of cleared lands in Mozambique in the last year.
Image by:Paul Dirdak, UMCOR
Source: New World Outlook*



*Teams of mine-detection dogs and handlers locate and clear the ground of active landmines. The dogs are trained by organizations and then utilized as part of demining programs supported by The United Methodist Church.
Image by:Paul Dirdak, UMCOR
Source: New World Outlook*

I was training people in Mukono, Uganda. Donnie collected hours and hours of film for editing in preparation for a DVD about the landmine project.

We interviewed a deminer in the Province of Inhambane. Several years ago, he had a landmine accident while clearing landmines and lost his lower right leg. The interview lasted only 30 minutes, but it was powerful. I can remember a few responses. I asked him the following questions.

"What do you miss most since the accident?"

His reply: "I can't play football (soccer)."

"Do you have children?"

"Yes, a boy."

"Have you told him about the accident?"

"Yes."

"What have you told him?"

"I told him that my efforts were not in vain. They were important! Where I was clearing mines, there is now a school. Children can attend without fear of getting hurt like I did. My efforts were important to our country."

Two years ago, I walked across a freshly cleared minefield. Today, this location is home to a large professional school with 1200 students learning skills such as welding, plumbing, and electrical servicing. The people in this community have an opportunity for success that was not available just two years ago. The landmines have been totally removed.

Two years ago, I watched as a demining survey team identified a minefield. Today, that cleared minefield has a large government school that trains medical personnel to work in clinics, doctors' offices, and hospitals. The health care needs of this and other communities are being met because of landmine removal.

New Life in Old Ruins

This year, we visited a location where a Methodist missionary had served more than 50 years ago. The area had been heavily mined to keep people from the land and the water that surrounds the old school and clinic. Much of the area had to be abandoned. The landmines have now been removed and plans are under way to build a new secondary school. We will now be able to use two of the buildings constructed during the missionary's service for teacher and administrative support. The new school will service a community of over 70,000.

We stopped along the road early one morning at a minefield that had been cleared last year. A woman working to clear the land told us that this was her first crop in years. Her small child was sitting at her side, watching. I am sure the child had no idea of the significance of her mother's swinging her pick into the ground.

Across the road, a thriving marketplace offered coconuts, corn-meal, sugar, and a variety of other daily staples. The market had been closed for years, and the people who remained lived in fear of landmines. The few who stayed had to walk for miles to another market. With the landmines removed, displaced victims of the civil war returned to their homes and started to rebuild their lives. The market is now alive with activity.

We talked with a young boy who walked across his sand-covered yard on his hands and the upper stubs of his legs to greet us. A daily task as simple as taking the family goats to the field had cost him both legs a few years ago. Every school day, he is pushed to school across sand-covered paths in a tricycle-style wheelchair with flattened tires and damaged tubes. Help and assistance for even bicycle-tire repair can be difficult. Artificial limbs were not even discussed as an option for him. He is one of many children who are off the main road, out of sight and forgotten by all but a few.

I have often been asked: "Is it our church's obligation to assist in humanitarian demining?" I usually reply: "Watch a child playing in a schoolyard that was once a minefield; see the crops growing; look at the houses being built next to cleared minefields; stand in joy as a woman dances while washing her clothes; or listen to the bucket hit the water at the bottom of the well." Yes, I believe we must be serving in this capacity in Mozambique.

Spread the Word

We, as the United Methodist Church, do not always successfully or boldly share the stories of our efforts and successes. Consequently, people, even our own congregations, do not know what we are doing, how we are serving, or the results of our faithful stewardship. I am pleased to say that this story—humanitarian demining in Mozambique and providing homes to flood-displaced families in Mozambique—is available on DVD.

One of the featured performers in the video is Cigo, one of seven Mine Detection Dogs (MDD) that began training this year to detect landmines. Cigo and his companions are each nearing a significant goal. They clear nearly 800 square meters of minefields every day. Give to UMCOR Advance #982575 for landmine removal.

For a copy of the free DVD, contact UMCOR at 800-554-8583.

For a free bulletin insert about the landmine removal program in Mozambique that you can download and copy for the Sunday bulletin, go to: <http://gbgm-umc.org/umcor/print/bulletininserts/landminestoschools.stm>

** Theodore (Ted) R. Warnock is a United Methodist missionary assigned by the General Board of Global Ministries to provide staff support for the Landmine Removal Program for Mozambique, United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). In addition, Ted is currently working with nine other African countries that are using earth/cement block-making machines to enable them to build schools, clinics, churches, homes, libraries, and other needed structures.*