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Meet the British company clearing up the minefields of the world

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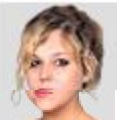

By Rebecca Burn-Callander, Enterprise Editor

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BUSINESS

Clearing up after a warring world

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Humanitarian landmine clearance has been a lucrative niche market since the Gulf War, and a small British firm making places safe to live is in demand, reports **Rebecca Burn-Callander**

Landmines are a cruel reality of war. Long after the soldiers have gone home, these silent killers lie in wait to claim further casualties. That is, until British firm The Development Initiative (TDI) arrives on the scene to clean up.

The company works closely with the United Nations, it's biggest client, to clear vast minefields in populated areas, and open roads and air strips so that emergency aid can be brought in. Once the humanitarian crisis has passed, TDI is contracted by oil and gas companies hoping to drill, and it works with utility providers and construction companies.

The £13m-turnover company currently has operations in Sudan, Mali and Kuwait.

TDI boss Hugh Morris has been in the landmine clearance business for 20 years. A South African national, he served in the British Army for seven years as an officer in the infantry before joining Minetech – now one of TDI's rivals. He's been involved in clean-up operations in most of the world's war zones, including Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. It is estimated that there are 110m active landmines and another 110m is storage ready for use.

About 2,000 people are involved in landmine accidents every month; about 800 killed and 1,200 maimed.

"Anti-personnel landmines are particularly nasty," says Morris. "They are designed to maim or injure. If you have a force advancing to your position, all you want to do is slow it down. The best way to do that is to make them carry casualties. As awful as it may sound, a dead soldier is much less trouble than a wounded one on the battlefield."

Humanitarian mine clearance first became a lucrative niche after the Gulf War, when the UN took on the job of clearing unexploded ordinance. Contracts can range from a few hundred thousand pounds to many millions.

Local recruits with The Development Initiative (TDI) sweeping for landmines in South Sudan

Recently, one company was awarded $400m (£255m) to de-mine Afghanistan.

The African countries are the toughest territories to de-mine, says Morris. "In Kosovo, mines are laid down in ordered rows. We'll receive records from a Russian-trained officer saying: "There are 60 mines in this field". In Africa, armies aren't as well trained. Mines are scattered at random and the records will say: 'I think the mines go from this tree to this tree. Or is it that tree?'" It is estimated that de-mining the African continent will cost $11bn.

This highly specialised niche remains quite small, however, and is dominated by British and American firms. "We routinely bid against around six other companies for the UN work," says Morris.

The job hasn't changed all that much in the past 25 years. "We're still using the same tools that were around during the Second World War," says Morris. "A prodder, some garden shears and a stick to feel for trip wire." Dogs are still frequently used to sniff out mines on long stretches of road.

Companies are currently ploughing huge sums of cash into developing more sophisticated technologies to find and destroy mines. Giant 30-tonne machines can now churn earth and crush mines, but they are useless in rocky or uphill terrain, and in wooded areas.

Metal detectors are also useful but many modern landmines are made almost entirely of plastic, with the tiniest slither of metal to pin the device together. "When you pull these mines out of the ground after 20 years and clean them off, they look like they've just come out of the box," says Morris. "We still don't have the silver bullet."

He admits: "A huge amount of money is spent in this industry just gardening. You're clearing ground that you are almost certain doesn't have mines in it, but you just have to make sure."

The tools may be basic but all of TDI's 600 employees are given rigorous training before they are set loose in a minefield. The company hasn't had a single accident in its 10-year history – and Morris is keen to keep it that way. "We guard that track record very closely," he says. "In Kosovo, we were clearing 200 to 300 mines a day. When you're dealing with those kinds of volumes, you have to make sure your guys are careful. We manage them constantly."

Around 70pc of TDI's workforce is recruited locally, providing jobs for people who have often been left with nothing.

"In Iraq post conflict, the Iraqis went into the munition containers and stole the copper rings from the bombs," says Morris. "They could have blown themselves to smithereens. People are desperate when war ends."

Experts from Britain – often retired military personnel – are flown in to take on the more technical roles, such as bomb and booby trap disposal, and to train up the new recruits.

The life of a de-miner is a hard one. "Generally they will work three months and then get two weeks off," he says. "That's a long time to be deployed in a harsh environment with no fresh meat or electricity. Sometimes they will have to slaughter their own goats and source fuel for the generators."

Various governments around the world want to ban anti-personnel landmines, but efforts have so far been in vain. Only 40 countries have signed up to the Ottawa Landmine Treaty. Notable omissions include the US, Russia and China.

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