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# **International Standards for Mine Action: The United Nations, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, and Defense Security Cooperation Agency**

**By**

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In November 1997, the Swiss Federal Council decided to establish and fund the activities of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD). The GICHD was formally established in April 1998, and its goal is to be an independent and impartial center of excellence within the international network of mine action activities. The governments of Austria, Belgium, Cambodia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Canton of Geneva also support the GICHD.

The GICHD aims to strengthen the role of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) as the focal point within the U.N. system for all mine-related activities and to make a substantial contribution to the formulation of coherent and comprehensive mine action strategies. A core mission of the GICHD is to lead an international effort to review and revise current international standards for mine action.

In July 1996, international standards for humanitarian mine clearance operations were proposed by working groups at a conference in Denmark. These principles were developed by a U.N. working group into the first edition of the *International Standards for Humanitarian Mine Clearance Operations*, published in March 1997, which included standards for mine survey and hazard marking, clearance procedures and clearance levels, communications and management information systems, training, site safety and medical requirements.

The United Nations initiated a review of the *International Standards for Humanitarian Mine Clearance Operations* in October 1999 to form part of a wider international review and revision of mine action standards and guidelines. Mine action refers to those activities, aimed at reducing the social, economic and environmental impact of landmine contamination. Mine action and its concomitant activities cannot be addressed in isolation as there is much overlap with complementary humanitarian and developmental programs and projects and, in some cases, with peacekeeping and peace support operations.

Mine action requires management planning at global, national, and local levels, and involves international, national, commercial, non-government organizations and military stakeholders operating under a variety of conditions.

The GICHD is implementing the standards revision on behalf of the UNMAS. The review acknowledges the important changes that have taken place in the management of mine action. International interest and funding has increased, and there is an expectation of improved cooperation, coordination and unity of effort within the community at large.

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DSCA is the focal point for the U.S. government's contribution to the revision process and manages, formulates and consolidates U.S. interagency comments for transmittal to the GICHD. In addition, DSCA oversees James Madison University's Mine Action Center (JMU-MAIC) (<http://maic.jmu.edu>) as it supports the standards process logistically, administratively, and electronically. Since before the first meeting of the users focus group on the new standards in October 1999, the MAIC has supported the Geneva Centre by hosting seminars and creating and maintaining a standards website ([www.mineclearancestandards.org](http://www.mineclearancestandards.org)). The MAIC also created a survey for the international community to elicit their views on what the revised standards should include. Results from this survey proved instrumental in the revision process.

As of January 2001, a total of twenty draft standards and guides have been developed and staffed for comment. These range from management, accreditation, and monitoring of demining organizations, general and technical surveys, hazard marking, post-clearance inspections and sampling, safety and occupational health, demining worksite safety, medical requirements, explosives storage, transportation and handling, and reporting and investigation of demining incidents.

### **Purpose of International Mine Action Standards**

Standards are being revised to improve safety and efficiency in mine action by providing guidance, by establishing principles and, in some cases, by defining international requirements and specifications. They also provide a frame of reference that encourages, and in some cases requires, the sponsors and managers of mine action programs and projects to achieve and demonstrate agreed levels of effectiveness and safety. They provide a common language and recommend the formats and rules for handling data that enable the free exchange of important information. This information exchange benefits other programs and projects and assists the mobilization, prioritization and management of resources.

The standards also provide a suitable medium for informing the mine action community of existing international regulations, conventions, treaties and standards which impact on mine action, particularly those referring to basic human rights, clearance requirements, hazard marking and general safety issues. They will assist national mine action authorities to establish national standards and standard operating procedures.

### **Guiding Principles**

The preparation of the standards has been guided by five principles: first, the natural right of national governments to apply national standards to national programs; second, standards should protect those most at risk; third, emphasis on building a national capacity to develop, maintain and apply appropriate standards for mine action; fourth, consistency with other international norms and standards; and fifth, compliance with international conventions and treaties.

### **National Responsibilities and Obligations**

The primary responsibility for mine action lies with the government of the mine-affected state. This responsibility is normally vested in a national mine action authority which is charged with the regulation, management and coordination of a national mine action program. The national mine action authority is responsible for establishing the national and local conditions which enable the effective management of mine action. It is ultimately responsible for all phases

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and all facets of a mine action program within its national boundaries, including the development of national mine action standards, standard operating procedures and instructions.

### **Humanitarian Imperative**

Land mines are first and foremost a humanitarian concern and must be addressed from the humanitarian perspective. In this regard, the framing of standards and their application to national mine action programs and local projects will reflect the fundamental humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and humanity so that mine action is focused on giving support to those who are most vulnerable.

### **Capacity Building**

In countries with long-term mine action needs, the development of an indigenous capacity should be addressed from the very outset of a mine action program. An indigenous capacity is characterized by a victim state's ability and willingness to develop and articulate overall policy and direction, as well as to plan, coordinate, manage and sustain a program that is accountable, cost-effective and able to address the humanitarian and socio-economic implications of landmine contamination. Such a capacity includes the willingness to promote the formation of national mine action organizations, be they military or civilian formations, commercial companies or non-governmental organizations.

### **Responsibilities and Obligations**

The revised standards define the responsibilities and obligations of the United Nations, the national mine action authorities, the donor community, mine action non-governmental organizations and commercial demining contractors, and even the mine action field workers for the proper and appropriate application of the standards in the conduct of their humanitarian work.

### **The Way Ahead**

Twenty separate standards have been written and are currently being staffed for comments by a UN/GCIHD sponsored users focus group. Subject to the comments received, the draft standards will be posted on the project website managed by the MAIC at JMU [www.mineclearancestandards.org](http://www.mineclearancestandards.org) for general comment and discussion, with the aim of agreeing to a set of revised mine action standards by early 2001.

The review and revision of international standards will, however, not end with the implementation of the twenty draft standards. It is now recognized that standards must be constantly kept under review to ensure that they reflect current practices and acknowledge changes to other international standards, regulations, requirements, treaties and conventions. It is envisioned that this work of preparing, reviewing and revising mine action standards will be conducted by technical committees, with the support of international, governmental and non-governmental organizations. All standards will be formally reviewed at least once every three years. In 2001, additional standards for management training, information management, and victims assistance activities will also be developed and staffed.

DSCA's office of Humanitarian Assistance and Demining, in partnership with the MAIC at James Madison University, will continue to provide support to the GICHD during the outreach

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and implementation phase of the revised standards and during the development of the “second stage” of guidelines.

**About the Author**

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