
Private Donation of Mine Detecting Dogs for Sri Lanka

By

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These valuable dogs, currently in training in Texas, are going to make a real difference once their paws hit the ground in the coming weeks and they complete their familiarization with Sri Lanka and their human handlers there this spring. These six dogs will accelerate the rate at which mined areas in Sri Lanka can be identified, demarcated, cleared, and double-checked to ensure that deadly persistent landmines these “hidden killers” really have been cleared. We are proud to celebrate this public-private investment that will speed demining operations in Sri Lanka and support the peace process which is so important there.

We have placed a finite dollar value on these dogs. The funds donated are indeed a lot of money. But think about the value of their work. How can we put a price on speeding up the process of identifying mined areas that could kill or maim innocent people, and liberating land for productive use? Lives will be saved. Displaced persons will return home. Fields will be replanted. Stability will be reinforced. And peace will be strengthened. What a great reward for all your efforts.

The US government has been a strong and steady supporter of humanitarian mine action going back to the late 1980s when we and some other nations began to recognize the magnitude of the global problem caused by persistent landmines left in the ground by irresponsible combatants, often leaving a deadly hazard in place long after the hostilities were a distant memory. The US began providing mine action assistance to Afghanistan starting in 1988, then to Cambodia and then to some other countries. The scale of the problem and our growing commitment inspired us to create the US Humanitarian Mine Action Program in 1993. And let me acknowledge the presence of Pat Patierno, who ran that program for several years, and did it brilliantly. Since the formal establishment of this program involving the Department of State and other agencies, our government has invested over \$700 million dollars in mine action all over the world.

Along the way, we realized that there is no reason to rely solely on governments to address the burden of overcoming this problem. So we launched our unique public-private partnership program, which as we see, is bringing a new and powerful element of private donor action to the fore on the landmine problem. It is very gratifying to see the results of outstanding efforts by private donors and by other governments as well. The Sri Lankan government’s humanitarian deminers, who began training in late August of 2003, have already exceeded expectations in the pace and quality of their operations. The partnership we are celebrating today will enable them to be still more effective.

You know, our belief in the usefulness of mine detecting dogs goes back to our own experience using dogs to find explosives and perform other special functions during World War II and in Vietnam. We drew on this when we introduced mine detecting dogs to Afghanistan in the late 1980s. We have considered mine detecting dogs to be a useful asset in what we call the deminer’s “tool box” in almost every mine affected country where we have provided mine action assistance since. That is over forty countries in every hemisphere in a wide range of climates and terrain. There is no single, one-size-fits-all solution to clearing landmines. We are not suggesting

that mine detecting dogs are infallible or the perfect “tool” for every situation. Dogs are living creatures. They are subject to moods, fatigue and illness just like humans. Extremes of weather, terrain and altitude can hinder their effectiveness just as it can the effectiveness of humans. And dogs can be “spoofed” by some mines and soil conditions just as human deminers and their metal detectors can also be thrown off. Nonetheless, we have to measure these almost human weaknesses against the proven track record of mine detecting dogs. And here is the good news: that track record is extraordinary!

Once again, Perry Baltimore and the Marshall Legacy Institute have been instrumental in bringing to fruition a public-private partnership initiative involving mine detecting dogs that will make a real difference in the lives of countless people. And let me also take this opportunity to acknowledge and welcome General Gordon Sullivan, former Chief of Staff of the United States Army, whose leadership and high standards of excellence is similarly reflected in everything about MLI, for whom he serves as Chairman Emeritus.

The US Humanitarian Mine Action Program, already one of the world’s largest, will continue to invest in clearing mines, teaching mine risk education to people who live in areas affected by landmines and unexploded ordnance, and providing assistance to those who have been seriously injured by landmines. Our program has received steady bi-partisan support from Congress over the years, reflecting the genuine concern that our legislators and their constituents have about the global landmine problem, and I want to extend to them our sincere appreciation.

We remain committed to the belief that private citizens and organizations have a role in reinforcing the official mine action efforts of the US government and the governments of other donor nations. We now proudly count over forty non-governmental organizations in our public-private partnership program to support mine action. Working with them, with all of you, and we hope with still more such partners in the future, we pledge to continue the vital work around the world to make the world mine-safe.