

Sri Lanka Mine Action programme: Achievements, challenges and the way ahead

1. Background

The nearly three decade long armed conflict between Sri Lanka's security forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) left many areas in Sri Lanka's northern and eastern parts contaminated by a wide range of Explosive Ordnance (EO), including anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines. Both Sri Lanka's security forces and the LTTE laid mines and used other EO extensively, resulting in a significant risk to the civilian population, their livelihood activities and development and infrastructure activities in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka.

2. Key achievements

1. Operators have **cleared** nearly 900,000 mines and destroyed 1,570,84 unexploded ordnance. This is a significant achievement given the complexity of Sri Lanka's EO contamination, both in terms of its density and extent and nature (technically challenging)
2. **Landmine accidents have decreased** from a total of 252 casualties in 2002 to a total of 3 in 2023
3. Mine action has facilitated the **safe resettlement** of a total of 917,984 internally displaced persons
4. Through clearance, victim assistance, employment opportunities, etc., mine action has been and continues to be, a **vehicle for reconciliation** in Sri Lanka
5. Demining has resulted in the **release of safe land**, enabling infrastructure and tourism development, cultivation, access to health and education facilities, and safe construction
6. Sri Lanka signed the **Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention in 2017**, signalling the country's commitment to international disarmament. Sri Lanka's clearance deadline under Article 5 is set at June 2028
7. Mine action has **employed over 3,000 civilians** through the four NGOs (MAG, HALO, DASH and SHARP), providing reliable incomes in areas that have limited employment opportunities. These NGOs are fully funded by international donors
8. Sri Lanka has three national operators that are independently operational (2 NGOs and the SLA HDU), this is in line with the **localisation agenda** that aims to make humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary
9. Since 2019, Sri Lanka's mine action programme has received **significant financial assistance from international donors** totalling approximately USD 79 million (including Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, Switzerland, Sweden the UK and the US)
10. Sri Lanka's mine action programme is scored 'GOOD' by the annual report [Mine Action Review, Clearing the Mines](#). The **success of Sri Lanka's mine action programme** has been highlighted at several international conferences, including in Geneva in June 2023
11. **Sri Lanka National Mine Action Completion Strategy 2023-2027**, developed consultatively with the support of GICHD in 2022, presents a clear strategic direction. The Government of Sri Lanka approved and launched the strategy in Colombo in March 2023.
12. **Sri Lanka's completion survey** was developed consultatively with the support of HALO Trust and the GICHD, with inputs from the SLA HDU and operators. The completion survey methodology provides clarity and transparency on the process of declaring Sri Lanka's administrative areas 'mine-free', based on interviews with community representatives at the lowest, Grama Niladaree Divisions (GN) administrative (village) level. The completion survey is supported by a solid information management system to ensure transparency of results and access to relevant information. Donors have recently been granted access to the online information management completion survey dashboard

13. Mine action has **received high-level political attention within the Government of Sri Lanka**: the GICHD and NMAC met with the Minister of Urban Development in mid-February to discuss key achievements, remaining challenges and suggested next steps. This Minister in turn organised meetings between NMAC, GICHD and the Minister of Foreign Affairs in late February. Both Ministers took on key messages, recognised the opportunities mine action brings to Sri Lanka and committed to highlighting the importance of government support to mine action within the Parliament, and to organising further mine action meetings at the ministerial level. GICHD and NMAC further met with the new Minister of Urban Development shortly after he took on his new role, following the parliamentary elections in mid-November 2024.

3. Remaining problem

As of December 2024, just over 23 km² of land are recorded in Sri Lanka's national database as suspected¹ or confirmed to contain landmines (this is the equivalent to a total of 38 400 cricket pitches). This is a significant increase compared to the 2022 strategy contamination baseline of 17 km². The discovery of previously unknown contamination can be explained by several factors, including 1) Increased civilian access to areas that were previously uninhabited; 2) The release of high security zones by the SLA; 3) The discovery of additional hazardous areas along the southern defence line; and 4) The implementation of the rigorous completion survey.

To address the remaining contamination safely, effectively, and efficiently, the Government of Sri Lanka needs to increase its financial support to the national mine action structures. This will allow NMAC (including the Kilinochchi Regional Mine Action Office (RMAO)) to continue monitoring the quality of survey and clearance activities. As operators continue to implement the completion survey, NMAC needs to monitor this process, to ensure quality and consistency. The Government of Sri Lanka also needs to continue coordinating with international donors, to ensure smooth information sharing and transparency on achievements and remaining challenges.

4. Next steps

The 2024 Cabinet approval for the demining programme allows agreements to be signed with NGOs for demining until the end of 2027. Building on achievements made, key next steps over the next few years include:

1. Initiatives will continue to be implemented to strengthen the capacity of NMAC Quality Management Officers involved in monitoring survey and clearance of suspected and confirmed hazardous areas. NMAC has further been authorised to recruit an additional six officers to strengthen its quality management systems. All new officers will be seconded from the SLA HDU.
2. With financial support from the US, GICHD has deployed an IM Advisor to support NMAC with improving the quality of the national database, ensuring coordination with operators and training of NMAC staff.
3. The mine action program employed over 3,000 female and male deminers as of mid-2022. As completion approaches, the mine action programme is implementing a staff transition process to provide training to all deminers and to facilitate a livelihood transition process that will facilitate their transition to alternative livelihood activities. The staff transition process needs to be implemented and

¹ The suspected land will be surveyed, it is likely that some of it will be cancelled and/or reduced in cases of absence of any evidence of contamination.

sequenced in line with the results of the completion survey to ensure enough staff remain with the operators to address the remaining contamination.

4. Sri Lanka's completion process will allow the Government of Sri Lanka to declare their administrative areas "mine free" in an evidence-based manner. The process formalises the mechanisms around the ongoing survey and clearance and the completion survey so that the Government can document the 'completion' of administrative areas in a consistent and transparent manner. This will enable the Government to demonstrate that All Reasonable Effort² has been made to identify and clear all mined areas, as per its Article 5 obligations under the Mine Ban Convention. 'Completion', in the context of Sri Lanka, refers to Sri Lanka fulfilling its Article 5 obligations and identifying and clearing anti-vehicle (AV) mines and other EO.
5. GICHD will support NMAC with developing a resource mobilisation strategy that will analyse current and required resources and identify resource gaps. The strategy will also present different funding scenarios and their implication on the completion timeline. This process started in June 2024 and continued in December with a stakeholder resource mobilisation strategy workshop, bringing together NMAC, SLA HDU and all national and international operators.
6. GICHD has supported the programme with developing a completion projection tool that looks at three main factors: 1. available funding 2. expected discovery previously unknown contamination (based on results coming out of Sri Lanka's completion survey) and 3. annual mine clearance results (square metres). As part of the process to develop this tool, GICHD with inputs from NMAC and operators, developed three different funding scenarios: 1. Increased funding 2. Same funding levels as in 2023 and 3. Decreased funding. The projection tool – an evidence-based tool - will allow the programme to project with confidence realistic timeline, depending on the three factors mentioned above.
7. GICHD will support the programme with organising a mid-term strategy review in Colombo in March 2024. This will bring NMAC, operators, SLA HDU and government ministries together to take stock of achievements made, analyse the context and determine, based on the projection tool, realistic timelines for completion based on the funding scenarios. Sri Lanka's review mine action strategy will allow the programme to gain greater clarity on the strategic direction towards achieving completion.

5. Opportunities and Challenges

The Government of Sri Lanka has a great opportunity to continue showcasing international best practice from its mine action programme to the global mine action sector. Sri Lanka's mine action programme is seen as a success story, including related to its evidence-based completion survey, state-of-the-art information management system and localised mine action programme. The completion of Sri Lanka's Article 5 obligations under the Mine ban Convention is within reach within the next few years. This is a significant achievement given the extent and complexity of the country's landmine contamination.

Achieving completion by the deadline of June 2028 is, however, no longer feasible. The main reasons include:

² The term "All Reasonable Effort" describes what is considered a minimum acceptable level of effort to identify and document mined areas or to remove the presence or suspicion of EO. "All reasonable effort" has been applied when the commitment of additional resources is considered to be unreasonable in relation to the results expected. SLNMMAS 04 the Land Release Process

1. The discovery of previously unknown mine contamination
2. Many of the recorded minefields in the national database turned out to be larger than expected. Some operators have mentioned that for every 2 square metres they cleared, they found 1 more square metre of mined land
3. The financial crisis resulted in operational stand-down and a significant increase in fuel prices
4. Unfavourable foreign exchange rates (significant impacts on NGOs receiving international funding in USD and other foreign currency)
5. Reduction in international funding (9% reduction in 2024, compared to 2023)
6. Reduction of funding to the SLA HDU has meant they could not deploy as many operational teams as planned and were not able to buy new equipment (vehicles, mine detection equipment, safety equipment, etc)
7. Staff retention: operators are struggling with employing and retaining staff in mine-affected areas, due to significant numbers migrating for financial reasons

Moving forward, it will be essential to ensure the following:

1. Sustained international funding to NGOs to ensure they can maintain or expand their operational capacities to implement survey and clearance activities;
2. National funding to the Sri Lanka Army Humanitarian Demining Units to allow them to be fully operational
3. Sufficient resources allocated to NMAC to allow it to implement its mandate in the most effective and efficient manner
4. Recognition of the loyal financial support of international donors to the mine action programme by the Government of Sri Lanka, to encourage them to continue funding Sri Lanka until it declares completion
5. In summary, Sri Lanka's mine action programme is regarded as a success story in the international mine action sector and 'mine-free' status is within reach.