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## Clear, then build

Afghanistan in 2011 remains heavily contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnance left over from the Soviet occupation and the years of internal conflict that followed. Mine clearance is an essential early step before a construction project can move forward.

“Every project the district undertakes requires a mine-clearance certificate from the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Center Afghanistan,” said Jeff Helmick, an ordnance and explosive safety specialist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan Engineer District-South. Helmick deployed to Afghanistan from the USACE Baltimore District.

Mine clearing includes disposal of unexploded ordnance other than mines, such as artillery shells. Contracts for smaller projects generally include mine clearance, while larger projects require separate mine-clearance efforts.

“At any one time, depending on requirements, we can have anywhere from two to 10 or more mine-clearance projects underway,” said Robert Garcia, project manager for mine clearance at the South District. Garcia deployed from the USACE Albuquerque District. “We use what is known as a Multiple Award Task Order Contract for large projects. We write task orders against the contract and have four large contractors that can execute the work.”

“The prime contractors use Afghan subcontractors, who are certified by the U.N.” Helmick continued. “The Afghans have gotten a lot of experience in mine clearing over the last 10 years — they are very professional.”

Normal mine-clearance projects search the site to a depth of one meter. “We get out to do quality control on the mine clearance as travel restrictions and security permit,” Helmick said. However, once construction begins, excavations sometimes uncover additional, deeper hazards.



Jeff Helmick speaks with mine-clearance contractors on a site with obsolete Soviet armor near Herat. (USACE photo/Mark Ray)

“We recently had to respond when a construction contractor discovered large amounts of ordnance buried about five-meters deep,” Helmick said. “Construction contractors are required to have unexploded ordnance support on call, but you can have cases where they come across large burial pits that they can’t handle.”

The buried ordnance is typically artillery projectiles up to 152 mm and larger, Helmick said. “The Soviets buried a lot of ordnance before they withdrew. They buried it deeply so it couldn’t be used against them during the withdrawal.”

In such cases, the district will assess the need for additional remediation and take the appropriate action, Garcia said. “In Afghanistan, mines and unexploded ordnance can be anywhere. Sometimes construction contractors just find things that are outside of the scope of their contracts and that they can’t handle.”

“Before you build in Afghanistan, you have to make sure there is nothing on the site that will go boom,” Helmick said. “That’s what mine and unexploded ordnance clearance is all about.”

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USACE’s Afghanistan Engineer District-South provides design and construction services throughout southern Afghanistan to support the International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan. The work is carried out in Regional Commands South, Southwest and West with the goal of achieving counterinsurgency effects and bolstering the Afghan Government’s services to its people.

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A mine-clearance worker on a site near Herat.  
(USACE photo/Mark Ray)