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### Unbuilt Anxieties: Infrastructure Projects, Transnational Conflict in the South China/East Sea, and Vietnamese Statehood

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# Humanitarian mine action in Myanmar and the reterritorialization of risk

*Ken MacLean*

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*Abstract:* This article examines current debates for and against Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) in Myanmar. The analysis, based on interviews with key local, national, and international actors involved in HMA, reveals why so many of them regard the mapping and removal of “nuisance” landmines as posing a security threat to the peace process. (Landmines deny people access to territory; when conflict ends, these landmines no longer serve a strategic purpose and thus become a dangerous nuisance.) These same debates also shed light on the growing role risk management approaches now take in Myanmar as a response to decades of authoritarian misrule by a succession of military regimes. The landmines, although buried in the ground, actively unsettle such good governance initiatives and the neoliberal development projects to which they are often linked, most often by reterritorializing military, humanitarian, political, and economic authority in overlapping and conflicting ways at multiple scales. The findings reveal why HMA actors resist labeling the crisis landmine contamination poses to civilians as a “crisis” that requires immediate humanitarian action.

*Keywords:* Burma, conflict, humanitarianism, landmines, Myanmar, risk

“I believe that ... we need to use landmines in order to safeguard the life and property of people and self-defense.”

President Thein Sein (Wa Lone 2013)

Landmines possess what Jane Bennett calls “thing-power.” Man-made items, she argues, have the uncanny ability “to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness” (2010: xvi). Landmines no longer appear inert from this perspective; instead,

they become nonhuman agents (actants) that can produce quantifiable effects in the world. These effects are not limited to the “dangerously vibrant matter” (Bennett 2010: 6) landmines contain—namely, blasting gelatin. Landmines, although buried in the ground, actively contribute to the (re)territorialization of who governs, how, and with what military, humanitarian, political, and economic goals in mind. These processes hinge on a paradox, however. Landmines do not “exist” except when they cease to exist—



that is, explode. Prior to this point, “sleeping soldiers,” as landmines are sometimes called, constitute only potential threats. Landmines are thus an absent presence in the landscape; they are not there and there at the same time, which generates immense uncertainty. Attending to the “thing-power” of landmines consequently offers a strategic entry point into perceptions of different classes of risk and the strategies adopted toward managing them.

Myanmar is the third most landmine-contaminated country in the world after Afghanistan and Colombia. According to Displacement Solutions, an organization that employs a rights-based approach to assist forced migrants around the world, perhaps as much as five million acres nationwide are contaminated, the most heavily affected areas being the country’s border regions due to decades-long low-intensity armed conflicts (2014: 6). The rugged terrain, tight travel restrictions, the almost complete absence of systematic data on the location of known hazardous areas, as well as the frequency of accidents, mean that the actual scale of the problem is not accurately known, however. These uncertainties present varying degrees of risk to everyone living in landmine-contaminated areas, but especially for the country’s estimated 370,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 480,000 refugees (UNHCR 2015). There is widespread recognition that there is a need to clear travel corridors and to establish landmine-free areas for forced migrants who wish to rebuild their lives in former conflict-affected areas. But a range of actors currently oppose humanitarian mine action (HMA), which entails risk education, clearance, victim assistance, advocacy, and stockpile destruction, on the grounds that doing so now presents a serious threat to the peace process.

During 2013 and 2014, I interviewed more than three dozen staff members of local and international organizations that carry out Mine Risk Education (MRE) in Myanmar. MRE consists of educational activities designed to raise awareness and promote behavioral change to reduce the risks landmines pose. To my surprise, nearly all of them stressed that MRE remains a

“very sensitive topic,” so much so that the political space for implementing it is extremely limited at present. This article explores why MRE is desired but deferred. I pursue a series of overarching questions that Achille Mbembe posed in his analysis of private indirect government: “Who is to be protected, by whom, against what and whom, and at what price?” (2001: 67). Rural populations in landmine-contaminated areas obviously face direct risks to their physical well-being. But other actors (e.g. government entities, state and nonstate armed groups, development agencies, nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], and business enterprises) bear other kinds of risks. When the interests of these actors are taken into account, MRE ceases to be a universally desired good because it contributes to new harms even as it reduces others.

### The technical turn

The idea of risk management (RM) is not new, but concerted efforts to organize uncertainty into risk that can be managed are quite recent according to Michael Power (2007: 6). He locates the institutionalization of RM during the mid-1990s, when the concept of good governance first emerged as the globally preferred solution to a wide range of policy failures. RM is attractive because it promises to identify failures before they occur. Consequently, risk does not have an ontological existence “out there,” he points out. To the contrary, RM practitioners produce risk through the very mechanisms they develop to manage potential failures. RM approaches, although they take diverse forms, thus share some common features: the institutionalization of RM as part of an organization’s internal processes, the proliferation of external standards and guidelines to define industry-wide best practices, and the emergence of professional experts to assess compliance with them being the three most common ones (Power 2007: 28–29, 203). These “technologies” of good governance not only reinforce one another over time, they colonize new domains, expanding

the role evidence-based management play in professional life (Power 1997).

HMA is a striking example. During the late 1980s and early 1990s armed groups began to use low-cost, easy-to-deploy antipersonnel landmines extensively. Media coverage detailing the collateral damage these landmines had upon civilian populations, especially children, raised public awareness about the scale of the problem. Several European NGOs, many of them staffed by ex-military personnel, formed as a response to the humanitarian crisis. They quickly expanded the focus of their work—originally mapping, marking, clearance, and stockpile destruction—to include risk education, victim rehabilitation programs, and advocacy campaigns to ban landmines entirely. These elements now constitute the five “pillars” of HMA. HALO Trust, the first international NGO devoted to carrying out HMA, began work in Afghanistan in 1988. The list of priority countries quickly expanded to include Kuwait (1991), Cambodia (1992), Mozambique (1992), and Angola (1994) (Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining 2014: 27–29). The number of international NGOs involved in HMA grew rapidly as well. So, too, did political support. In 1997, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), a coalition consisting of more than one thousand NGOs worldwide, achieved what many people believed to be impossible—the passage of the Ottawa Treaty. It banned the use, production, transfer, and stockpiling of antipersonnel landmines. The ICBL received the Nobel Peace Prize later that year (Tepe 2011; Rutherford 2010).

Less apparent, at the time, was the radical reorganization of HMA that followed the passage of the Treaty. The UN took several important steps to professionalize HMA and to institutionalize its position within the sector immediately afterwards (Mather 2002: 239–50). The UN formed the Mine Action Service (UNMAS) in 1997 to coordinate HMA efforts around the world and to serve as the central repository for HMA-related information. In 1998, the Swiss government created the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD),

which became an independent NGO in 2003. GICHD works to professionalize the sector through operational assistance, knowledge management and information dissemination, and the development of International Mine Action Standards. Both entities led efforts to link humanitarian assistance with development aid via a focus on sustainable livelihood approaches (Mather 2002: 243). The development of new calculative practices was critical to this process of technical formalization. Suspected hazardous area mapping using sophisticated sampling methods and geographic information systems, the creation of specialized software for standardizing global information management, and the use of cost-benefit risk assessment formulas for landmine clearance priority setting are emblematic of this emphasis on data-driven analysis and action. Ironically, the technical turn has deep historical roots in the metrics states developed “to see” (Scott 1998), and with the same goals in mind: managing land, resources, and populations at a distance to reduce the risks landmines posed. The result was also the same. These practices shifted decision-making authority away from “locally embedded” actors and toward UNMAS and GICHD specialists, as well as international NGOs more generally. This process transformed HMA into a professional “field,” which served to “circumscribe an autonomy that they [UNMAS and GICHD] have previously defended vigorously” (Mather 2002: 248).

Mather’s account of the concerted efforts to professionalize and centralize HMA during the late 1990s and early 2000s is a helpful one, though it overstates the ability of UNMAS and GICHD to govern what does and does not happen “on the ground.” Indeed, more than a dozen different UN bodies are involved in some aspect of HMA, which hampers coordination internally and implementation externally. Furthermore, “[t]he sector has become increasingly institutionalized, competitive, and driven by organizational self-interest and egos when the goal should be to put yourself out of work,” one HMA professional told me (Anonymous HMA con-

sultant, May 31, 2014). Finally, HMA as a “field” has grown considerably more complex over the past decade due to a number of factors, the increased competition for demining contracts in a context where the boundaries between military counterinsurgency operations, humanitarian aid, and development assistance are increasingly blurred being a key one. Consequently, the cost-benefit analyses that undergird the calculation of risk in the field of HMA have blurred as well.

### HMA as risk object

The organization of uncertainty into risk that can be managed requires “objects” (Hiltgartner 1992). However, risk objects are not material objects *per se*; rather, they are social constructions that draw humans and nonhumans together into networks that produce material effects (Latour 1990). Such objects emerge when organizations recognize that the potential for severe harm exists *and* the existing methods for predicting, managing, and recovering from it are inadequate. Risk objects, regardless of type, thus share common characteristics. The labels given to them are descriptive in nature, their causal antecedents are presumed to be identifiable, and targeted regulatory reforms and closer managerial oversight are believed to be able to mitigate their adverse impacts or prevent them altogether (Power 2007: 26). From this perspective, landmines are not risk objects, although as physical objects they regularly cause indiscriminate and catastrophic harm. Instead, it is HMA that functions as the risk object.

First, HMA is a sufficiently coherent organizing concept for a professionalized field to take institutionalized form, though not everyone agrees how its five “pillars” should be sequenced. UNMAS and GICHD, for example, promote the adoption of a “common and consistent” approach based upon ISO 9001-2008 process-based quality management systems, but HMA practitioners frequently do not follow standard operating procedures either by choice or because local circumstances do not permit

it. Second, investment in mine action rose to a high of US \$681 million in 2012, a 25 percent increase over the year before; however, this figure is still grossly inadequate due to the magnitude of the contamination problem globally (ICBL 2013: 59). Given the extraordinary costs associated with removing and destroying an emplaced mine (on average US \$300–1,000 per mine when training, salary, insurance, and other benefits are included), HMA offers significant financial incentives for organizations to participate in the process and/or to position themselves to repurpose cleared land for commercial activities afterwards. Third, the amount of money involved contributes to disagreements over how HMA should be managed and coordinated at the international, national, and local levels. The disputes over HMA governance mechanisms thus connect a diverse array of otherwise unconnected military, humanitarian, political, economic, and social actors into networked interactions with one another. Yet these same connections, because they are overwhelmingly managerial in approach and technocratic in implementation, continually threaten to disconnect (i.e., exclude) some key actors—typically, the people most affected by landmine contamination—from post-conflict development initiatives.

For example, a Mine Clearance Risk Assessment involves the calculation of known hazards, estimates of unknown ones, the probability that a hazard will be realized (e.g., a person stepping on a landmine), and the consequences of the event in terms of harm and/or damage. Consequently, the goal is to optimize the amount of risk reduction achieved and to minimize the amount of money invested in this task, which requires the identification of the point where mitigated hazards (landmines cleared) and residual hazards (landmines that remain) reach a tolerable risk threshold. Such an assessment requires a “compromise between available clearance funds, technical feasibility, and the intended use of the land,” as zero-risk is not feasible (GICHD 2005: 4–5). Who clears land and to what end thus plays a critical role in determining how this cost-benefit analysis is conducted.

The financialization of risk can also serve as a potential asset for other parties. As one sign of this, HMA frequently enables rent extraction in the form of demining contracts, development projects, and enterprise activities. These dynamics are already present in Myanmar, which helps explain the strong resistance my informants voice to expanding MRE, much less mapping and clearing landmines, in former conflict-affected areas. Some of the objections I heard are political in nature. Due to the uncertainty surrounding the peace process, armed actors that are party to the different conflicts, as well as civilian populations that use landmines for self-defense purposes, resist some or all aspects of HMA for tactical reasons. Other objections are humanitarian in orientation. These objections center on the logistical challenges of clearing travel corridors for safe passage and arable land for the large-scale resettlement of IDPs and returning refugees in areas where multiple armed groups exert varying degrees of authority. Still other objections revolve around property rights. Existing laws favor investors over cultivators, and the government does not recognize customary forms of land use, including shifting cultivation, which is widespread in (former) conflict-affected areas. These problems are closely connected. However, my informants strongly disagreed about which of the three were the most important and thus deserved to be prioritized; what (if any) action now would be prudent to address them; and what kinds of solutions would be the most effective over the long term. The case study below explains why so many actors regard HMA, a risk management approach to harm reduction, to be a destabilizing security threat.

### **HMA in Burma/Myanmar**

Formed in 2012, the Peace Donor Support Group and the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative provide technical assistance to the government and the Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) participating in the national ceasefire negotiations.

They also support the government-affiliated Myanmar Peace Center (MPC), which helps facilitate political dialogue regarding the peace process, coordinates the delivery of humanitarian assistance to some conflict-affected areas, and serves as the point of contact for official outreach activities and public diplomacy efforts. HMA falls under the center's oversight. Norwegian People's Aid (2013), one of the world's largest HMA NGOs, signed a 3.5 million euro agreement with the European Union (EU) in mid-2013 to establish and to assist the national Myanmar Mine Action Center (MMAC) toward this end. The original goal of the partnership, according to Norwegian People's Aid's Humanitarian Disarmament Program Manager, was to map suspected hazardous areas and to clear landmines in known ones (Aksel Steen-Nilsen, June 11, 2014). When the agreement was first announced, Ambassador David Lipman (Norwegian People's Aid 2013), who heads the EU Delegation to Thailand and is accredited to Myanmar, stated that these activities would foster "confidence-building" and "the consolidation of the peace process" and "lay the ground work for better access to long-term development programs." But he quickly went on to add, "we are fully aware that demining is a potentially sensitive matter, and therefore we have made sure that surveys and demining operations will only take place on request by MMAC and with the expressive consent of all parties concerned."

His caveat is an important one. It highlights why the state's armed forces (Tatmadaw) regard HMA as a risk object (i.e., a potentially explosive political problem that requires careful management), stated Dr. Sai Thet Oo, a researcher at the Pyidaungsu Institute. First, the statement acknowledges the government's long-standing reluctance to accept foreign humanitarian assistance, which the previous military regime regarded as a potential threat to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Foreign financial support for community-based organizations that deliver cross-border aid to conflict-affected communities reinforce this view, as nearly all of them are either affiliated with

NSAGs or rely upon their cooperation to operate. Second, the statement explicitly grants veto authority to MMAC, which is not a politically independent entity. Doing so thus strengthens the military-dominated government's firm position that Myanmar should not adopt a federated system but instead maintain a strong unitary one. Nearly all nonstate actors (armed and unarmed alike) that represent nonmajority ethnic populations strongly dispute the government's position on this issue, he emphasized; consequently, the disagreement remains a significant obstacle to political dialogue (Dr. Sai Thet Oo, May 28, 2014).

The MMAC issued its National Mine Standards and Integrated Mine Action Strategy in late 2013. Both draft documents reproduce these same tensions. His Excellency U Aung Min, who heads the government-run Myanmar Peace Center (2013) acknowledges that both drafts are "living" documents and that "variations in procedures and methods of operation," provided they meet minimum requirements, are to be expected. Nonetheless, the standards and strategy MMAC sets forth in the documents conform closely with the top-down, centralized approach that UNMAS and GICHD advocate for the "national ownership" of HMA globally, especially with regard to quality management and priority setting (i.e., which areas get cleared, when, and for what purpose). The result is an organizational model that strengthens the decision-making power and regulatory authority of national actors, with the Tatmadaw being the most influential one, at the expense of subnational and local actors. This asymmetry is a precondition for the institutionalization of a risk management process, which Power (2007: 28) observes is "expressed and materialized in [international] standards and guidelines and mobilized [nationally] in the name of good governance and opportunity." Admittedly, the transformation of HMA into a risk object in Myanmar is not by definition a bad one; it brings together actors that would not otherwise interact with one another and is thus critical to confidence building and postconflict development. How-

ever, all of the representatives of local NGOs I interviewed complained that this asymmetry privileges the political concerns and economic interests of elites, and it does so in ways that will undermine the stated goal of HMA, which is to restore peace and security at the community level in former conflict-affected areas.

Their concerns are not limited to people already in these areas but include people who will travel through landmine-contaminated regions regardless of whether or not the key actors agree on when HMA should begin, one MRE trainer told me (Anonymous, June 11, 2014). As of January 2014, the UNHCR estimates that more than 230,000 people remain displaced in southeast Myanmar, the geographic focus of the issues under discussion. Approximately 128,000 refugees live in nine refugee camps along the border, and an unknown number in three IDP camps just inside the Thai border (UNHCR 2015). The UNHCR played a leading role in multi-stakeholder discussions regarding the possibility of their resettlement during 2013 and 2014. A broad consensus emerged that conditions inside the country were not yet conducive for voluntary, safe, and dignified return. The International Organization of Migration regional program director emphasized this point. "The key actors have not stated what would have to be in place or have occurred for them to start planning for a large-scale return. The refugee community is intentionally vague. They respect and support the rights of individuals to go, but maintain that conditions are not yet right for everyone. This point reflects different positions of refugee groups and international organizations on the committee. The position of the refugee groups depends on the political groups inside. They follow their lead" (David John, IOM regional program coordinator, May 19, 2014). Nonetheless, a growing number of forced migrants are making "look and see" trips to assess local conditions, and the number of those who choose to "spontaneously return" may reach twenty thousand during 2015 (UNHCR 2015), increasing the likelihood that landmine accidents will surge.

Therefore, “preparedness” remains a frequently discussed topic among organizations that provide services to forced migrants (Ian Hall, UNHCR senior coordinator, June 4, 2014; Nilar Myaing, The Border Consortium-Yangon director, May 11, 2014). However, not everyone agrees on what “preparedness” entails for their respective organizations, their relationships with one another, and, of course, the IDPs and refugees themselves. The regional camp coordinator for The Border Consortium, a humanitarian NGO, stated: “most of us avoid saying ‘return’ when describing ‘preparedness’ for this reason. When we speak with donors, yes, we refer to relocation to Burma. But when I speak with the camp residents I emphasize the mental aspects. How can we use our available and shrinking resources more efficiently and effectively? How can we change our attitudes? This is true not only for the refugees, who need to start thinking about the future differently, but NGOs too as they shift from aid to development” (Chris Clifford, The Border Consortium regional camp coordinator, June 23, 2014).

“Preparedness” is risk object in its own right in another way. The current situation further complicates the preparedness discussions of these humanitarian organizations (Myanmar Peace Monitor 2014). The field coordinator for an international humanitarian organization, who wished to remain anonymous, provided three examples. Some NSAG leaders reportedly want members of their own ethnic groups who have been displaced to remain displaced for the time being because they serve as a useful bargaining tool and provide a way to obtain additional resources via the foreign assistance some of them receive. Other NSAG leaders want manageable numbers of forced migrants to settle areas under their control in order to recruit new supporters, to retain existing ones, and to regain the trust of those who became disillusioned by the “struggle” (Anonymous international humanitarian organization field coordinator, June 2, 2014). But almost all NSAGs agree large-scale resettlement will have to wait until a nationwide ceasefire is signed and meaningful political dialogue with the government begins.

The Tatmadaw leadership shares this view. Consequently, the Myanmar Mine Action Center has taken very little concrete action. When I asked why, an embassy official told me, “the military is not currently involved in discussions around landmines, and what to do with them. They have [also] made it clear that they will not do so until a national ceasefire is signed. MRE is the only thing legally possible at present, so MMAC staff people spend their days sleeping in the corners” (Anonymous embassy staff program coordinator, June 12, 2014). Some humanitarian actors have chosen to engage in unauthorized HMA initiatives rather than wait for nationwide agreements as a result. For example, “The Flying Surgical Team is a network that enables medics to more rapidly provide trauma care to victims and to get them to a clinic,” a staff person working for the Karen Development, Health, and Welfare Organization (KDHWO) told me. “The team does landmine mine victim surveys and a landmine survey when they are in the area. We can’t exactly demarcate an area, or we will be accused of being spies ... Because of the context, we spend more of the time going into the older data in order to systematically identify all of the hazardous areas and determine whether they are still dangerous” (Program coordinator KDHWO, June 5, 2014). KDHWO’s actions highlight the complicated role HMA plays in efforts to reterritorialize military, political, and economic authority in Karen areas of southeastern Myanmar.

### **Bottom-up HMA**

General Ner Dah is a controversial figure, in part because of his privileged background. He is very skeptical of the government’s “sincerity” with regard to the peace negotiations (Sai Mawn, former member of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team, May 27, 2014). And, although the general has limited combat experience, he regularly states that the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), the militia he commands, is prepared to resume armed struggle, if neces-



sary. His position conflicts with those made by other politico-military elites who are competing to be the person who finally brings “peace” to the Karen. (The challenge for the Karen, one political analyst states, “is how to best sequence humanitarian and development assistance with the political process to avoid being seen as buying peace” (Paul Keenan, Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies senior researcher, May 22, 2014)). Despite such pro-conflict statements, General Ner Dah, along with Colonel Saw Nay Soe Mya, approved the implementation of an HMA pilot project—The Karen Peoples’ Demining Initiative—in an area under the KNDO’s administrative control to demonstrate his pro-peace credentials in April 2014. The region’s complex history of conflict complicates the general’s ability to do so.

In January 2012, the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Tatmadaw negotiated a verbal ceasefire agreement, ending the world’s longest running insurgency, which began in 1948. However, the agreement did not address the underlying political and economic drivers of the conflict: Karen demands for significant regional autonomy within a federal system. Despite some progress on the federalism issue, the Tatmadaw continues to reinforce its bases in KNU-administered regions, which are estimated to exceed three hundred in number, explained a Karen Human Rights Group field researcher (Anonymous, KHRG, June 6, 2014). Firefights when patrols encounter one another still occur, and the KNDO, which has approximately one thousand troops deployed across seven districts, works closely with the KNU and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), for this reason, he explained.

The Karen Peoples’ Demining Initiative is located in an area that was the focus of significant armed conflict during the early to mid-1990s due to its proximity to Manerplaw, the KNU’s former headquarters. The Tatmadaw overran Manerplaw in 1995. But its battalions were not able to fully consolidate all of their frontline positions, and the KNDO was later able to reestablish its authority in a small number of places,

a Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies analyst told me (Keenan, May 22, 2014). Landmine contamination remains a significant problem, however, and residents place themselves at considerable risk whenever they engage in high-risk behaviors: working their fields and orchards, traveling along narrow dirt paths, and foraging for forest products. Lethality rates are remarkably high (30–35 percent) the head of the Danish Demining Group found (Fath and Simon 2015: 22–23). General Ner Dah prioritized HMA in Mu Aye Pu Village for this reason, a British former paratrooper-turned-demining expert involved in the pilot project informed me. The general, he continued, views the initiative to be a precursor to a large-scale landmine clearance effort for IDPs, refugees, and demobilized soldiers who wish to resettle in the area. National-level criticism and local-level concerns quickly emerged, however, and the scope for INGO-facilitated HMA, including MRE, further narrowed. The details highlight how the pilot project—while based on the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence—is perceived to be anything but because HMA poses potentially “explosive” risks.

## Resisting HMA

Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA) hired Displacement Solutions (DS) to carry out a stakeholder consultation process in mid-2013, during which they spoke with nearly one hundred individuals representing landmine-affected communities, civil society organizations, and community-based groups, as well as local and international NGOs involved in HMA and some NSAGs. (The Tatmadaw did not participate.) The process resulted in an electronically available, but not yet officially released, report by DS that outlined the fourteen-step sequence for operationalizing land-sensitive HMA in accordance with its eight core principles. The “Do No Harm” approach, one of the co-authors of the report told me, wrongly assumes that the risks associated with moving forward with landmine clearance can be man-

aged, even without having the procedural and practical mechanisms in place to adjudicate conflicting property claims or to provide legal recourse to people who have had their land seized.

NPA's Humanitarian Disarmament Program manager, for example, noted that the report's emphasis on housing, land, and property rights, although critically important for the success of HMA, was premature (Aksel Steen-Nilsen, June 11, 2014). Some NSAGs, such as the KNU, recognize customary or traditional land rights in areas they administer (DS 2014: 26). However, the government currently does not, he explained. Consequently, people in conflict-affected areas do not enjoy adequate protection under the law, and organizations involved in HMA, like NPA, do not have the expertise or authority to assist them. More pressing, he explained, was the MMAC's apparent reluctance to authorize and to coordinate MRE, much less mapping and signposting hazardous areas. "There's been dialogue with the Myanmar Peace Center and there was complete agreement on everything, right down to the number of cleaning ladies that needed to be hired. But again, it didn't happen. The money is just sitting there." The Peace Center, he reported, provided some vague statements indicating that, "it was not yet appropriate to begin discussing operational plans," but it took them a full year before they stated directly that it would "have to wait until the Tatmadaw and the NSAGs had buy-in post-ceasefire." No one is officially allowed to do anything beyond MRE for this reason, he stated.<sup>1</sup>

Many people share his frustration with the view that MRE is "very sensitive." A national MRE coordinating group consisting of government and nongovernmental organizations exists, and it is reasonably effective in terms of data collection regarding landmine accidents, as well as the number of workshops held and training materials distributed. But there is significant disagreement on the content, which is emblematic of the broader problem: the people most in need of MRE are not able to easily obtain it. For example, the chief minister for Karen State announced in November 2013 that all ongoing

MRE activities had to stop immediately on the grounds that "it was not yet the right time," but his office did not provide any further details, one foreign MRE trainer told me. It later turned out that an image in the MRE materials, which UNICEF and DanChurchAid Mine Action had prepared using a photograph from Cambodia, was the source of the problem. The photograph depicted a soldier, wearing a nondescript uniform, laying a landmine. In the minister's opinion, the image "might harm the peoples' respect for the [Myanmar] government" (Committee of Internally Displaced Karen People [CIDKP] staff member, June 16, 2014). Fortunately, MRE has since resumed, and NPA has actually carried out some nontechnical surveys in Karen State, as have other international and local organizations that are operating "under the radar." However, MRE remains a problem on a practical level.

A MRE trainer for the CIDKP, the humanitarian wing of the KNU, told me that the existing curriculum, based on the one used in Cambodia, encourages rather than discourages risky behavior. "I teach many things that are not in it, and I do not teach everything that is." He explained: "booby traps are common in Cambodia, but in Myanmar they are not. One time I taught villagers about them [after they expressed desire to learn more about the pictures on the flipcharts]. They thought they were great. They wanted to make some for defensive purposes!" (CIDKP MRE instructor, June 5, 2014). Mutual suspicion is a significant problem as well. "Marking hazardous areas is a non-starter at the national level," a technical expert with the Mine Advisory Group said. In fact, MMAC "is downright hostile to the idea," the person continued (Mine Advisory Group technical expert, June 11, 2014). So, too, are NSAGs, like the KNU, which assert that doing so makes them vulnerable tactically. (NSAGs currently regard systematic mine removal and destruction, like disarmament more generally, as "surrender.") Consequently, local Karen organizations that for safety reasons want to identify suspected hazardous areas and signpost known ones in nonstrategic areas regularly face accusations that they are government

collaborators, even though many of them have provided invaluable humanitarian assistance to their conflict-affected communities for decades (Karen NGO data analyst, June 5, 2014).

These tensions, which frame MRE as a military threat, also contribute to conflicting efforts to (re)territorialize administrative authority in the same places but at different scales. A program manager for Mercy Corps explained that the KNPP, an NSAG in neighboring Karenni State that provides prosthetics to anyone regardless of their political affiliation or ethnic identity, and the government disagree on many issues (especially taxation and administrative decision-making authority), despite a long-standing ceasefire agreement. Tensions are now so high that the KNPP stopped talking with the Karenni State officials on the grounds that they wanted to resolve national-level issues first and then discuss state-level ones. The state-level officials strongly disagreed, asserting the sequencing should be reversed. Local and international NGOs are “caught in the middle because both sides are so suspicious of one another,” she said. “The KNPP thinks that we are supporting the government position on things by doing MRE, and the government thinks that we are too close to the KNPP. For these reasons, everyone is closely monitoring the NGOs” (Mercy Corps program manager, June 16, 2014).

## Rogue HMA

“Rogue” landmine action, a phrase I heard multiple times, poses a related threat, especially a financial one to communities in conflict-affected areas. Given the severity of landmine contamination in eastern Myanmar and the slow pace of the peace process, I asked INGO staff whether NSAGs should proceed with MRE, mapping, and demining in nonstrategic areas of Karen State where local communities have requested it. “They control the territory, after all,” I pointed out. Nearly all of them objected to the proposal on the grounds that landmine removal, destruction, and land release would not be done

in accordance with international protocols and would thus provide a false sense of security to people in such areas. The country director of one major HMA INGO angrily told me this included the foreign-led Karen Peoples’ Demining Team Initiative operating in KNDO-administered territory. After she departed, the MRE program coordinator for this same organization leaned forward and admitted such efforts could satisfy these protocols with sufficient training and support; however, “mine removal and destruction is big business. A lot of powerful actors are involved and a lot of money is at stake,” hence the country director’s objections (Anonymous, June 11, 2014).

I first met the former British paratrooper-turned-HMA expert leading the aforementioned “rogue” initiative in May 2014. He had just arrived in a Thai border town from KNDO-controlled territory, and he planned to return to the area to help clear as much land as possible before the rainy season started. The approach, he told me, was based on the low-cost, low-tech approach he had developed in Sri Lanka following the 2002 Armistice Agreement. The “hedgehog” consisted of a tractor tiller and a reinforced front-mounted roller with large metal teeth welded on it. The driver, he explained, directed the roller back and forth over the target area repeatedly until the spikes had pierced every square centimeter of the sandy soil. Deminers then used long-handled rakes, which do not exert sufficient downward pressure to trigger the landmines, to locate any the tiller had failed to detonate. The landmines, once removed, were destroyed. “The simplicity of the model I use is what makes it so attractive. It is effective. You can do it anywhere, not just along the main roads, which is what the big outfits tend to do. The tractor can be easily disassembled and reassembled for use anywhere it is needed ... We ask if you had no landmines, what would you do next? What do you need to improve your livelihoods? The community prioritizes its needs and that is where we demine” (HMA consultant, May 31, 2014).

He claimed that the removal of nuisance mines using these methods met or surpassed in-

ternational standards in terms of safety and at a fraction of the cost of contracting a team of highly paid technical experts using expensive equipment. The approach made it possible to employ hundreds of people. The money they earned provided urgently needed start-up capital for households to invest in small-scale development initiatives, as well as schools and health clinics, he explained (*ibid.*). The pilot project in Karen State, he continued, offered an opportunity to demonstrate why bottom-up, community-driven HMA, based on a modified version of the Sri Lankan model, could be implemented now without having to wait for the military and political obstacles that prevent top-down, state-led initiatives from being started. “I want to help them understand that HMA is about enabling people to live a life without constraints. It is not about removing landmines used for strategic defense,” he stressed (*ibid.*).

Some INGOs were somewhat more receptive to the idea of a “Karen Mine Action Center,” which would permit rural communities to determine where HMA occurs, and the KNU to oversee land-related issues in coordination with civil-society organizations and civilians in contaminated areas (Karen Mine Action Center Funding Proposal, June 2014, on file with author). However, their technical staff noted they could not provide any direct support beyond MRE for the foreseeable future for several reasons. For example, the current international top-down model for HMA does not permit bilateral donors to provide funds to NSAGs that want to carry out humanitarian landmine removal, stockpile destruction, and land release in collaboration with local groups, as doing so would bypass the government-controlled Myanmar Mine Action Center and, in their view, undermine military support for the peace process. Additionally, HMA contracts can be financially lucrative, and a decentralized process would be likely to exclude state entities and their business partners with an economic interest in accessing these revenue streams. Finally, NSAGs, like the government itself, are not unified and coherent entities; rather, different factions pursue their

own commercial interests. Many KNLA field commanders have entered into joint venture agreements with other armed actors, including ones they fought against for decades. The agreements permit business entrepreneurs to demine areas where valuable natural resources are located (e.g., tropical hardwoods and gold) and, in some cases, lay new mines around the perimeter of these enclaves to prevent others from entry (Eh Thwa, Mae Tao Clinic Mae Sot Prosthetics Clinic, June 3, 2014). “The government lets them do some business, collect some taxes, and have territorial management,” a researcher explained. “[It] focuses on small groups to create splinter ones. They know that if they offer economic incentives they can make friends with one group and then tackle the other armed groups. That is why ceasefire terms are not universal ... For small groups, a ceasefire agreement basically means that they have to surrender, but doing so lets the leaders enjoy a luxurious life” (Dr. Sai Thet Oo, May 28, 2014). Gaining KNU approval to transform unauthorized (i.e., “rogue”) HMA into authorized HMA on a widespread basis in KNU-administered areas thus face numerous challenges at the national and subnational levels.

The same is also true locally. Many domestic NGOs, civil society organizations, and community-based groups are very concerned about the tremendous increase in foreign assistance to Myanmar. They assert that the assistance supports the proliferation of government networks in areas where they previously had little or none and undermines existing local groups that provide social services, especially health and education, to their respective conflict-affected communities. Pippa Curwen, the director of the Burma Relief Center, a cross-border humanitarian organization, describes this increase as an “aid offensive.” “The current situation is now critical,” she stated. “Aid is drying up here, and the funds, which are going inside, are supporting government structures in one way or another. In the process, they are undermining the structures that CSOs built up over the years, and that is a serious problem. The ethnic movement is in greater danger” (Pippa Curwen, May 29,

2014). Saw Greh Moo (2013), a Karen research analyst for the Salween Policy Institute, calls it the “development offensive.” He cited the 539-page blueprint for development in southeastern Myanmar that the Ministry of Border Affairs and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (2013) released in early 2014. The blueprint emphasizes the construction of economic corridors, agro-industrial clusters, as well as free trade zones and industrial estates with the assumption that conflict-affected populations, but especially IDPs and returning refugees, will want to work in them. (A sizable percentage of them will have to pass through landmine-contaminated regions to do so, he pointed out.) Not everyone shares this assumption, however. More than thirty civil society organizations that operate in the target region quickly issued a detailed critique of the neoliberal model for border economic development, which they claim was prepared without input from people living in it and without public consultation afterwards (Karen Peace Support Network 2014).

Nevertheless, market-driven proposals are part of an increasingly dominant narrative in Myanmar, which recasts the armed conflicts as being driven by chronic underdevelopment rather than unresolved political grievances (Ashley South, MPSI consultant, June 11, 2014; Steve Marshall, ILO liaison officer, June 13, 2014). Michael Brown (2014), the founder and managing partner of Dawpuwae Development International (DDI), which he describes as a “venture philanthropy” group, embodies the “aid” and “development” offensives that many local organizations fear. DDI, Brown says, “is committed to empowerment through prosperity and exporting liberty through capitalism.” “Wealth can be obtained without oppression [and] profit can coexist with humanitarian efforts that enrich rather than impoverish,” he continues. DDI’s “lucrative [gold] mining operations will serve as the engine to fuel the three P’s of prosperity” in Karen State: “Protect. Preserve. Profit.” The mining industry’s track record makes this outcome unlikely. (“It is the road construction that makes [resource extraction] possible. Business

interests dictate where roads are built. For example, roads are being constructed near Hpa-an [Karen State] for gold mining, but the KNU hasn’t given permission for it to be done,” the former coordinator of a landmine prosthetics clinic complained) (Eh Thwa, June 3, 2014). This is why economic development poses a threat to its own realization. Economic development in conflict-affected areas will be impossible without HMA. But HMA, even if carried out in accordance with international best practices, may destroy what decades of military offensives did not: the possibility for these communities to make informed decisions about what form their own futures should take in postconflict Myanmar.

## Conclusion

“How did crisis, once a signifier for a critical decisive moment, come to be construed as a protracted historical and experiential condition,” Janet Roitman (2014: 2) asks at the start of her book, *Anti-crisis*. Crisis narratives, she observes, are everywhere, so much so that they define our contemporary moment. Yet, Roitman continues, we have limited understanding of how such narratives not only shape judgments about claims regarding what precipitated the crisis, but also of the effects these claims have upon the specific measures enacted to prevent its reoccurrence. (The former is a post hoc judgment, she notes, whereas the latter is an a priori one that assumes it is possible to determine with confidence when the normal state of affairs ended and a state of emergency began.) The epistemological space in which RM experts make judgments is far from clear, however. Hence, the proliferation of institutionalized mechanisms that “shape and frame our knowledge of, and management strategies for, risk, including the definition of specific ‘risk objects,’” according to Michael Power (2007: 3–4). HMA, I argue, is such a risk object.

The urgent need for HMA in Myanmar is the product of an enduring crisis. Living conditions in most conflict-affected areas are such that or-

ganizations are urging donors, the government, and NSAGs to take immediate action to address the humanitarian emergency that exists in the country's border regions rather than wait for a nationwide ceasefire agreement, much less one regarding postconflict political arrangements. According to the World Bank (2014) per capita spending on health (services, family planning, nutrition, and emergency aid combined), currently at US \$20, is the sixth lowest in the world. Yet these key decision makers resist labeling this crisis a "crisis" in the name of furthering the peace process. As one sign of this resistance, the KNLA and the Tatmadaw signed a thirty-four-point military code of conduct in 2013 to manage the threat that the lack of political agreement poses to its verbal ceasefire with one another. Consequently, both armed parties regard any effort to change the status quo, including MRE, as having the potential to undermine the "new" normal, which is neither resumed war nor a genuine peace but something in-between. One Karen farmer in a conflict-affected zone, who resides in a village that still uses landmines for self-protection, described this liminal state of affairs: "We don't worry every day about being attacked. We know there is a lull and that lines of communication have improved. The KNLA do not go into white [government-controlled] zones, and the Tatmadaw do not go into black [KNLA-controlled] ones. But things could change very quickly" (Alex Bookbinder, journalist, June 15, 2014).

One risk object can reside within another larger one, and changes affecting one can have cascading effects on others, as is clearly the case with HMA. HMA affords opportunities for action in some locales but prevents them in others due to the international, national, and subnational actors involved and the people, places, and things they claim to be under their military, humanitarian, political, and economic control. Some villages in frontline areas want HMA despite the uncertain security situation, whereas others decidedly do not. Similarly, some villages in nonstrategic areas desire the removal of nuisance mines, while others fear that clearance will

accelerate resource extraction, landlessness, and development-induced displacement. Viewed in this light, landmines are not simply "things." Rather, as Jane Bennett (2010: 38) might put it, landmines are "dangerously vibrant matter." They are simultaneously there and not there. Consequently, landmines possess potentiality, one that enables them, even as they lie underground, to exert a form of agency—albeit one without intent or directionality, which is what makes their removal currently so explosive in contemporary Myanmar.

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## Notes

1. NPA has recently been able to carry out some nontechnical surveys as part of the MPSI and in some Mon villages in Karen areas.

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