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Lancashire & North West magazine

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The Mines Advisory Group

2 Years On Andrew Harris reports again on the vital work of a charity based in our region



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Two years ago I described how a north west based charity was doing vital work to prevent landmines from past conflicts killing and maiming adults and children in former war zones around the world. The Mines Advisory Group – known as MAG – are continuing this work in an amazing number of countries including Angola, Bosnia Hertzegovina, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cyprus, Laos, Mali, Nigeria, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Zimbabwe and troubled parts of the middle east. Due to the efforts of Diana, Princess of Wales, and others the 1997 Ottawa Treaty was agreed by 122 governments world-wide and banned the further production and use of landmines. 40 more governments have joined since then. Millions of landmines remain hidden, however, and improvised explosive devices cannot be outlawed so easily. The challenge of eliminating past landmines is huge and MAG is vital to this work.

Twenty years after it was co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize MAG has raised over £168,000 in the first six weeks of an appeal to fund such work. This is enough to clear a minefield in Angola seven times the size of Trafalgar Square. Under the UK Aid Match



scheme all donations to MAG's **Walk Without Fear** appeal will be doubled by the UK Government until the 24th December.

MAG CEO Jane Cocking explains "We are delighted and overwhelmed that the UK public have been so generous in the first few weeks of our appeal – and that the government will match money given so far. This will make an enormous difference to people living in fear of landmines and unexploded ordnance around the world. However there is much more to

do. In Angola alone more than 1,400 minefields still need to be cleared before people can walk without fear."

Money from the UK Government will go towards supporting MAG's work in Angola – a country still contaminated and menaced by landmines 15 years after the end of their civil war. It is estimated that no fewer than 88,000 people are living with injuries caused by landmines.

Bill Marsden is MAG's Regional Director and oversees their programme in Angola. He explained "Hearing

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An Anthology in Pictures

1. *The aftermath of conflict*
2. *Grim games for the young*
3. *What can kill you in a field*
4. *MAG finding mines first*
5. *Some are harder to find*
6. *MAG carrying mines away*
7. *A close-up of the evil thing*
8. *Exploding mines the safe way*
9. *Mines gone: refugees return*
10. *Welcome normality returns*
11. *The children can play again*



reports of people killed and injured by mines and bombs is the part of my job that I hate. The feeling is never stronger than when I find out it was a child who will never walk again, never see again or never breathe again. I can't help but think of my children at those moments. Any parent would have the same reaction – their lives are more precious to us than our own, after all.

But though I feel frustrated and angry when I receive reports of a child killed or injured, I never feel like giving up. These reports create the same reaction in me every time I read the tragic news they contain – a determination that we must clear the land faster. That we must get to the next mine and bomb before a child does.

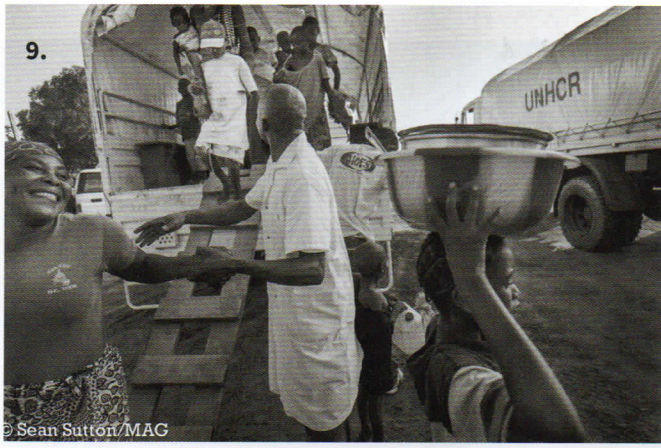
We must get there first. There is too much at stake and time is not on our side. Knowing that any day, any hour, any minute could be that moment too late to save another child's life. That is what spurs me on."

The money raised so far will enable MAG to clear more than 88,000 sq metres of land in eastern Angola. As a result hundreds of people will be able to walk and play without fear for the first time in many years. Cleared land can be used for much-needed activities such as new schools, more dwellings, farming and other livelihoods which bring economic opportunities back to impoverished communities.

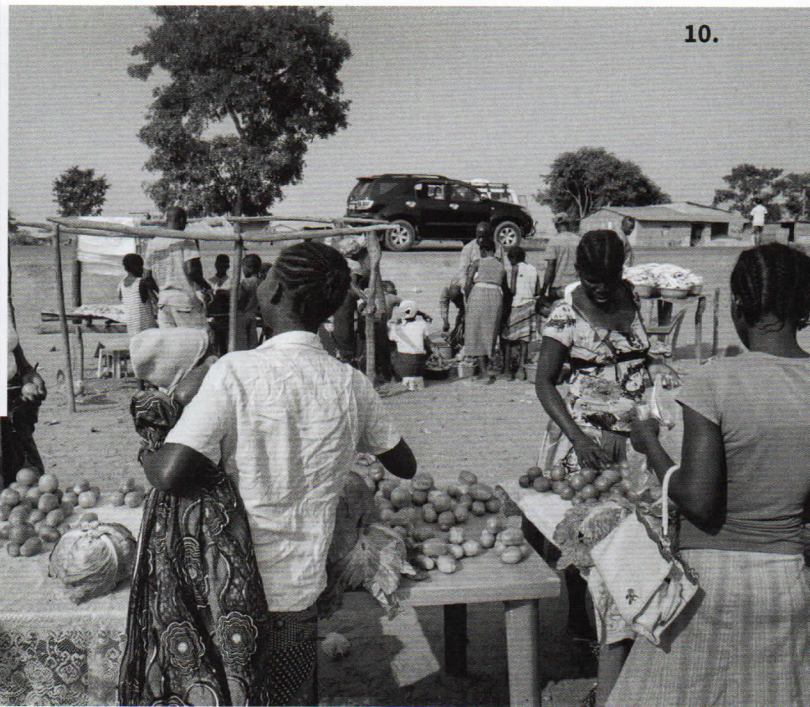
At a recent civic reception to

mark the 20th anniversary of MAG the Lord Mayor of Manchester Cllr Eddy Newman paid this tribute: "Manchester proudly boasts a number of Nobel Laureates but MAG are the only Manchester-based recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Their award provided deserved recognition for their work at the forefront of prohibiting the use of anti-personnel mines and removing abandoned explosive devices from communities around the world."

Since MAG was founded in 1989 more than 17.5 million people in more than 40 conflict-affected countries have benefitted from what the charity has done. But landmines still threaten the lives of 60 million people around the world. Twenty years after they were



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banned they continue to destroy lives every day. MAG clear landmines and help communities in contaminated countries to avoid death or injury and feel safe to return to their normal lives.

Personal accounts are harrowing. Ismail Mustafa remembers “I was collecting mushrooms on the hill nearby. I didn’t see the mine. There was a huge explosion. When I woke up I saw that both my legs were gone: I thought my life was over. My brother and another guy were with me . They made a stretcher from sticks and tied it together with clothing. It took two hours to get off the mountain. My daughter was also injured. She found a shell and brought it into the house and put it on the fire. She didn’t know what she was doing at the time – she was only three. She is now blind and has lost an arm.”

MAG Teams cleared 13 minefields around the village of Pirijan in northern Iraq in 2014 and so far eight families have returned. Before clearance two people lost a leg and three people lost hands in the explosions. Head man Shagr Ahmad said demining work had “given us our soul and given us life again.” When Shagr returned to the village in 2003 he kept losing sheep to landmines. But demining has changed the fortunes of the village dramatically. Shagr explained “Now I have 550 sheep and grow wheat and vegetables. Before we could barely survive. All the families here are in a good situation now and we have nothing to fear.”

Some people think that landmines are yesterday’s problem but they are killing and injuring people today. With another £80,000 MAG could finish clearing land in the fast-growing village of Luconha in Angola’s Moxico province. This would free more than a 1,000 people from the fear created by the five minefields that surround their village. They could return to work, allow their children to play and



walk without fear. The charity is appealing for donations to help this work. They say that £20 enables them to clear 10 sq metres of land contaminated by landmines.

MAG’s **Walk Without Fear** appeal is made possible by the UK Aid Match Scheme run by the UK Department for International Development. It aims to bring the public, charities and government together to collectively change the lives of some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. For every £1 donated to such a charity appeal – like MAG – the government will also contribute £1 of UK Aid to enable the charity to go further in changing and saving lives subject only to a total of £5 million per appeal. *To qualify, donations should be from individuals living in the UK. Donations need to be made before the 24th December 2017. Donations from businesses are very welcome but are not eligible for*

matching by the UK Government. To learn more or donate please visit www.maginternational.org or call MAG is a north west charity doing amazing work in countries and communities that need it most. Your columnist hopes that you will consider helping them to help others.

Andrew Harris gratefully acknowledges the help provided by Katie Ward of di:ga Communications on behalf of MAG in the preparation of this article. All images are courtesy of © Sean Sutton/MAG. Our January 2016 article ‘The Mines Advisory Group – Making people safe’ can be seen at www.andrewharris.co.uk under ‘Published Articles’.

