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Outside Witness Testimony for the Senate Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Near East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism

Afghanistan: The Humanitarian Crisis and U.S. Response

The HALO Trust is the largest humanitarian landmine clearance organization in the world. An Anglo-American nonprofit, HALO was first established in Afghanistan in 1988 and now works in 28 countries worldwide, employing over 10,000 staff.

Founded in response to the devastation following the Soviet occupation, HALO currently employs over 2,100 staff-members in Afghanistan and operates in almost every province. The program is led and managed by Afghan nationals who continue to have high-level access to local and national government authorities despite the Taliban takeover. During its history, HALO Afghanistan has cleared over 850,000 mines, 10.7 million other explosive devices, and returned 498 square miles of contaminated land back to affected communities – an area over seven times the size of Washington, DC.

Explosive clearance is a precondition for refugees to return to their homes, schools to reopen, and farmers to sow their fields. HALO successfully operated throughout the post-Soviet civil war, the first Taliban government, and the two decades following the US-led invasion in 2001. However, **the contamination left from the final phase of fighting last year in Afghanistan is some of the worst HALO has seen in its 30+ years operating in the country.**

The primary explosive risk Afghanistan faces today is the threat of victim-activated Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). These murderous weapons, constructed with homemade explosives or pilfered munitions and rigged with pressure sensors, are the landmines of the 21st century. **From July 2020-June 2021, Afghanistan suffered over 1,500 civilian casualties from explosives. Over two-thirds of these casualties were from IED's.** Since August 2021, HALO has already identified an area three and a half times the size of Central Park that contains IED contamination. And compared to January 2021, the number of IEDs cleared by HALO in January 2022 increased 740%.

The very homemade nature of these devices makes them dangerous and complicated to clear. HALO is currently the only organization conducting IED clearance in Afghanistan. Through the generous support of private American donors and European countries, HALO has been able to deploy a limited number of emergency IED clearance teams to clear contamination around schools, Internal Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, and other vital infrastructure. **However, sustaining and extending this capacity to meet the humanitarian needs of the Afghan people will require US government support.**

For over 20 years, the U.S. State Department has generously funded the clearance of Soviet-era landmines thanks to bipartisan support in for the Conventional Weapons Destruction (CWD) account. HALO and other NGOs continue to receive US government support to clear legacy explosives. However, to date the State Department has not shown interest in supporting IED clearance.

Given the importance of IED clearance to addressing humanitarian crisis, we hope the committee will use its oversight authority to encourage the State Department to address this critical need.