Since World War I, the ever-expanding use of explosive devices, including land mines, has led to the killing and injuring of innocent civilians long after conflicts have ended. Land mines and explosive remnants of war kill or maim tens of thousands of civilians each year—decades after the fighting has stopped.

Abandoned ordnance and poorly secured or ill-managed stockpiles of small arms and light weapons pose a serious threat to regional stability and public safety, particularly if they fall into the hands of criminals and terrorists. This complicates U.S. diplomatic and development efforts in key countries for the war on terror.
To clean up this aftermath of conflict and forestall new ones, the Department created in 2003 the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs to reduce the harmful effects of indiscriminately used, illicit and abandoned conventional weapons of war.

On any given day, WRA staff may be addressing a Rotary Club in Arizona, chairing a 24-nation donor meeting in New York or donning helmets and body armor to monitor programs in minefields and clearance sites in some 25 countries around the world. The staff is diverse, with Foreign and Civil Service personnel, military officers and contractors working together to clear a path to a safer world.

PM/WRA formulates policy, manages programs and conducts public outreach. As Murf McCloy, the office’s senior technical adviser and a 36-year veteran of the Marine Corps, says, “Nothing we do is in a vacuum. We work with the Defense Department, international donors, the United Nations, host nation officials, everybody.”

Having to coordinate work with so many actors is difficult, but Mr. McCloy says it’s nothing that can’t be solved with a little “extra elbow grease.” Office staff all say their top priority is keeping innocent people alive and returning valuable land to productive use.

The Tools of War

The United Nations estimates that there are as many as 600 million small arms and light weapons in circulation around the world.
globe. Ammunition, explosives and other instruments of war are readily available as well.

“You see piles and piles of shells,” says foreign affairs officer Katherine Baker, describing a munitions dump she recently visited.

Many weapons that have not yet reached the black market are highly vulnerable to theft by terrorists and criminal organizations. In countries flooded with light weapons, the rule of law is trumped by the rule of the gun, making any lasting peace nearly impossible.

PM/WRA works to change this equation by securing stockpiles of small arms, light weapons and munitions; destroying unneeded stocks (more than 900,000 small arms and light weapons and 80 million pieces of munitions so far); and fighting the illicit arms trade.

One particular weapon—the man-portable air defense system, also known as shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles—has risen to the top of the post–9/11 U.S. security agenda, in large part because of the 2002 attempted shoot-down of a civilian airliner in Mombasa, Kenya.

Under Secretary of State for International Security Affairs Robert Joseph has characterized MANPADS as the second greatest weapons threat, after weapons of mass destruction, that the U.S. faces today. Since the 1970s, MANPADS have been used against at least 40 civilian aircraft, resulting in more than 24 crashes. PM/WRA leads the Department’s effort against loosely secured, excess or otherwise at-risk foreign stocks of MANPADS, helping to destroy more than 19,000 since 2003, with commitments for the destruction of thousands more.

Policy adviser Stephanie Pico says the job offers great satisfaction in “eliminating the tools of war and doing our small part in the war on terror.”

Problem Solving

In 2005, there were a reported 7,328 casualties from land mines and other explosive remnants of war, with estimates as high as 20,000 worldwide if non-reported casualties were included. Some 21 percent of the victims are children. But the effects of land mines and explosive remnants of war go far beyond the number of people killed or disabled. Land mines make large swaths of valuable land unusable, hindering economic development, post-conflict reconstruction and the safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Even if mines are not actually present, the fear that they could be often stalls post-conflict recovery. That is why PM/WRA’s programs are focused on clearing land mines and explosive remnants of war from areas where they have the greatest humanitarian impact, rather than expending finite resources to locate and clear every last land mine in some remote area.

“The Survey Action Center, a nongovernmental organization that specializes in measuring the impact of land mines, has estimated that some 20 percent of the world’s minefields cause about 80 percent of the casualties,” says Richard Kidd, director of PM/WRA. The key management challenge is to target limited resources where they will have the greatest effect.

“This focused approach, one which is being emulated by more and more donors, really is working,” adds Jim Lawrence, the office’s principal deputy director. “The global land mine problem won’t be with us forever. This is one humanitarian problem that has an end state. Using a public health metaphor, land mines are like polio, not malaria. Their harmful effects can be eradicated.”

Program Manager Deborah Netland enjoys “making a difference in the world.” Like most office staff, she spends a lot of time traveling to countries affected by land mines, small arms and light weapons. She loves the feeling of accomplishment she gets from her projects.

“One year, an area is an active minefield,” she says. “Return a year later and there are now houses, crops, schools and clinics. It is a great feeling. You get to see and enjoy the impact of your work.”

Connecting with Americans

PM/WRA has built a public-private partnership program that raises awareness and resources from the business community and civil society to support mine action programs around the world. With nearly 60 nongovernmental organization partners, the office staff reaches tens of thousands of American citizens each year at outreach events, conferences and other gatherings.
Addressing audiences in large cities and small towns, officers describe the successful U.S. program and the progress being made. They challenge students and adults to take action. Stacy Bernard Davis has seen the program grow to a nationwide network of concerned and impassioned supporters.

“Something about the land mine problem and its terrible impact on innocent children and civilians really moves and motivates people,” she says. “We love connecting with Americans whose core values of compassion, philanthropy and volunteerism are as strong as ever. They just need a program they can support, and we provide it by linking concerned citizens with NGOs who need help.”

PM/WRA assistance has helped raise tens of millions of dollars for mine action. The office makes excellent use of information technology, including a highly acclaimed website, distribution lists, a stream of media notes, an e-newsletter and web-conferences. In 2004, the office won the Secretary’s Award for Public Outreach.

PM/WRA has an ambitious goal: to rid the world of the harmful effects generated by surplus and dangerous conventional weapons of war. With each weapon the office destroys, the world becomes just a little bit safer, something all in PM/WRA are rightly proud of.