

Media Release

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Australian Defence Department's 'Secret Weapon' Maps Human Terrain

11 August 2011, Canberra: Sophisticated mapping technology which plots socio-cultural information is equipping Australia's military force to make better informed decisions while deployed on operations overseas.

Underpinned with technology from leading Australian Geographic Information System (GIS) specialists Esri Australia, 'Human Terrain' maps display the human geography of an area using dozens of different categories such as ethnicity, religion and language.

The technology supports key military decisions in peacekeeping, conflict, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

Esri Australia Manager for Defence Simon Hill said the ability to analyse human geography gave the Department of Defence a more complete understanding of the area it was operating in.

"Human terrain analysis is all about determining the relationship between the characteristics of a human population and that population's location," Mr Hill said.

"It provides a geographic context and a timeline to human behaviour on the ground – who controls local resources such as water or transport routes, how ethnic boundaries are shifting, what type of crimes are most prevalent, what level of education a population has - which assists with predicting future behaviour.

"The problem in modern defence is there is often too much information available so adding a geographic context helps filter the most relevant from the least relevant."

Human terrain mapping overlays human geographic data with features like buildings, roads, mountains and rivers, on a topographical map.

By visually representing layers of information in a geographic context, users can navigate through the maze of seemingly disparate, unrelated data to clearly identify correlations and relationships that exist.

This enables senior Defence leaders to make quicker, more accurate operational decisions.

Mr Hill said Esri Australia worked with key technology partners to provide a platform for human terrain mapping that was usable by non-GIS experts.

“Although extremely complex processing occurs behind the scenes, we are able to create the illusion of simplicity with simple, intuitive interfaces that non-GIS specialists demand,” Mr Hill said.

“Increasingly we’re all becoming geospatial information users and – in defence as well as private business and government organisations – people don’t need to be GIS experts.”

“However, they do need to be able to make valuable use of the technology.”

Mr Hill said the GIS technology solutions developed by Esri Australia and its partners ensure Defence personnel can exploit the full power of human geography.

“Paper-based maps are static and of finite value but, in today’s digital world, the data is dynamic and online maps can be provided and updated in near real-time,” Mr Hill said.

“Not only is this critical in the planning of operations but, by using mobile devices, deployed forces are equipped with situational awareness.

“Troops in the field can also contribute more quickly and completely to the intelligence picture long before they’re debriefed back at base.”

Mr Hill said the GIS technology behind human terrain mapping was helping Australia’s Defence Force continue a long tradition of punching above their weight.

“Australia has a flexible, agile Defence Force which relies on superior information for competitive advantage,” Mr Hill said.

“With state-of-the-art GIS technology, Australia’s military continues a tradition of working smarter and faster than other significantly larger Defence Forces around the globe.”

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About Esri Australia

Esri Australia has a 33 year history of providing location intelligence and data mapping solutions that help organisations make smart business decisions. The combination of local expertise and world-leading Esri GIS technology has helped thousands of government departments and commercial organisations to turn their data, information and knowledge into collective insight to reveal opportunity.

About GIS

Geographic Information Systems are a key piece of technology used in thousands of organisations Australia-wide from the military and government, to the insurance and mining sector. Australia’s GIS industry currently stands at over \$2.1 billion and more than 300,000 organisations across the world use Esri GIS.