From the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean: The World's Largest Mine Field?

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From the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean: The World's Largest Mine Field?

The latest conflict between India and Pakistan has spurred both countries to renounce their borders. This could result in the creation of the largest mine field the world has ever seen.

History of Conflicts

When the partition of British India was first discussed in 1947, Pakistan hoped to acquire all Muslim-majority areas, including Kashmir. However, the status of this province was left undecided in the final agreement of independence, pending the de­cision of Kashmir's king. After three months, Pakistan tried for waiting for the king's answer and launched an invasion to help speed up his decision-making process. To the Kashmiri's surprise and dis­appointment, the Pakistani army signed a treaty of accession with India and in­vited the Indian army to assist in the re­moval of Pakistani forces. The UN stepped in and demanded that a pleb­iscite be held to determine the fate of the province once the Pakistan army had withdrawn from Kashmir. The Pakistanis refused to give up the land they had taken over. India never held the plebiscite, and the two nations have battled over Kas­hmiri areas of role in Kashmir—con­cem up to 5,000 landmines. Such figures can­not be accurately extrapolated, but if those numbers even remotely reflect the situation along the rest of the LoC, this region represents the latest, largest challenge for the humanitarian demining community.

Civilians and Landmines

"We have never used landmines in any civilian areas. Landmines are solely used for defensive military purposes," claimed B.S. Saini, second secretary at the High Commission of India in the Tornam National Post. "We have to defend our borders, and landmines are a very cost­effective way to do this," he added. India and Pakistan are two of several nations that have declared landmines to be an integral part of their national defense plans. After all, they are cheap, readily available and easy to employ and main­tain. Landmines effectively lay any land to the opposition. Unfortunately, landmines also deny land to the very civilians they are designed to protect, as governmental claims notwithstanding. Civilians are always the uninten­tioned victims of landmines, the unavoidable "collateral damage" and the casualties listed in newspaper articles. Respectable governments strive to reduce the number of civilians impacted, but battlefield- and farmers' interests intersect all too often. A recent article in the Christi­an Science Monitor includes an interview with General K.M. Singh, an Indian living less than a mile from the Pakistani border. "We cannot stay in our houses, as the fear of guns is always looming over our heads. We cannot visit our fields, as landmines have been laid there. Where shall we go?" he queries. Singh is not alone. The in­termittent fighting has displaced more than 70,000 civilians, thousands of whom have never ventured through newly mined fields while search­ing for a place to eat. Civilians of border villages have reported mine blasts almost daily, often triggered by returning refugees who are unaware of recently laid mines.

No Alternatives to Landmines?

The militaries of both nations ac­knowledge the threat that mines pose to civilians, but they insist that it is better than the alternative full-scale war. India and Pakistan both possess limited-rage nuclear arms to complement their full inventories of chemical and biological weapons. Both countries insist that they would never be the first to fire nuclear missiles, but retal­liatory fire is another matter. If the possi­bility of a sudden mass invasion existed, both nations would surely be on hair-trig­ger alert. Nuclear war would then be only a panic-struck president's impulsive re­action away. Landmines remove the threat of a surprise invasion, forcing mili­tary strategists to re-route invad­ing forces and giving the defensive nation more time to react without overreacting.

Rakesh Sood, an Indian ambassador, out­lined India's goals for laying the mine fields, saying they would provide a "sub­stantial system" and a "psychological bar­rier" to any invading force. In these countries (and many others) military doctrines, landmines serve a legitimate, necessary and non­repeatable function, however detrimental they may be to society. These "benefits" to landmines only apply when only military use landmines in a responsible manner. This would include marking all mine fields, notifying civilians of every mine field's location, and promptly removing all mines once they have served their purpose. Both armies ap­pear to be falling short of these standards in their current mine-laying exercises. India in particular has had trouble with unmarked mine fields. In the month of December above 90 Indians, civilians and soldiers included, were killed along the LoC by Indian­ian landmines. In response, the Indian army launched an inquiry to determine if sol­diers had followed accepted doctrine while laying the mines. When a country's own defensive mines are blowing up a country's own soldiers, standard operating proce­dures (SOPs) are clearly not being fol­lowed. And if soldiers themselves are un­aware of the mine fields' locations, civilians are certainly at even more risk.

Despite such evidence, spokesmen for the Indian military insist that soldiers laying mines methodically recorded the location of every single mine. Then, when the time comes, the same soldiers who implanted the mines evacuate them. Un­fortunately, the time never comes for many mine fields. Some fields are pol­}

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

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World's Largest Mine Field?

India and Pakistan have a long his­tory of warfare that has often centered on the province of Kashmir. Landmines have been used throughout these con­flicts, but the recent attack on the Indian Parliament has sparked an epidemic of mine laying that dwarfs any prior use of these weapons. Millions of landmines could eventually litter thousands of miles along the entire Pakistani border, creating a mine field stretching from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. Both governments insist that they are minimiz­ing impact on civilians by following stan­dard marking and reporting procedures, but reports from the border area present a different view. Large as the impact of these mines is today, their effect could stretch decades into the future, claiming new victims with every passing year.

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