Socio-Economic Impact of Landmines in Iraq

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**Socio-Economic Impact of Landmines in Iraq**

**Background**

The socio-economic impact of landmines, UXO and stockpiled munitions extends across multiple areas, including:

- Accessing public areas
- Salvaging metal from mines/UXO
- Accessing land for agriculture
- Repairing infrastructure

The indirect impact of landmines includes mass displacement/return and the spread of infectious diseases, in part due to the inability to repair water purification systems and to provide public health services in regions isolated by mines and UXO.

**Accessing Public Areas**

Johan Van Der Merwe, Technical Advisor with UNOPS and MiniTech International, a leading mine clearance contractor, were recently in Iraq. Johan Van Der Merwe observed, "In the south, one of the biggest problems is stockpiled munitions. Wide ranges of munitions are stockpiled everywhere—enough to fry an egg," says Colonel Dyck.

Numerous reports of death and injury associated with UXO and landmines confirm that children are especially at risk. For example:

- In May 2003, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) reported an eight month old baby died in a blast in the living room of her family's tent in Baghdad. The baby walked on the floor and bumped an unexploded bomb brought into the house by her young cousin.
- Johan Van Der Merwe observed that "kids playing with propellant in small arm shells. They light the propellant and then fire mortar rounds, creating an instantaneous flame. Many sustain flash burns from being too close when the mortar detons."
- In the streets of Baghdad, children are reportedly playing soccer among explosive remnants of war, unexploded munitions, stock piles of ammunition, and even abandoned armored fighting vehicles. On April 27th, three children were killed while playing with a mortar shell.

**Amnesty International**

International delegates saw children playing around landmines located immediately next to the homes of university staff. The staff told the delegates that they had asked for help in removing landmines, but no such assistance had been received.
Salvaging Metal From Mines/UXO

Johan Van Der Merwe emphasizes that in a society with sanctions "nothing is left; everything is recycled." He comments on the problem of post-war damaged vehicles driving past an antelope killed by lions in Africa; "after a while, all you see is the white bones." Likewise, each day he passed the abandoned vehicles, it was stripped more, until all that was left was the skeleton of the vehicle. Every nut and bolt has a use. In the comment on UXO and stockpiled munitions also attract civilians. Adults take packaging from depots and munitions factories and use the wood packaging material for firewood. Civilians have also been breaking apart munitions to get brass casing. There are huge amounts of explosives in private homes as people search for scrap copper, brass and aluminum with little regard for danger. Some comments on stealing minefield markings, placing the general population at considerable risk. Johan Van Der Merwe explains, "The markings are taken back onto society where they are used as rope and a picker can be used in fences. As a result, kids play in this area and adults have to get firewood in the area. In the Bata region, MineTech Internation counteracted the problem by using mine risk education (MRE) teams to tell locals that if the markers continued to be removed, the mine removal teams would no longer be able to assist them and the UXO would remain indefinitely."

MineTech describes landmines and UXO as a "vital economic resource," and in many poor people who, in addition to salvaging scrap metal, sometimes use the explosive content of mines and UXO. Johan Van Der Merwe explained that an incident where a man lost four of his children and two friends in a UXO salvage accident. In 2001 alone, about 30 people per month had been involved in accidents related to mines or UXO.

In 2002, UNOPS completed its Landmine Impact Survey of the three northern governments and determined that grazing and planting crops are the two main activities denied land in northern Iraq. Over a quarter of the population engages in herding activity and about 22 percent of the population raises crops. Grazing areas are most affected by landmines, especially around hillocks and mountains that were former military positions and the shepherds and their presence throughout the region, this figure suggests that one out of three mine-impacted communities is affected by landmines planted in grazing areas.

Repairing infrastructure

Minefields and UXO pose an immediate threat to local authorities trying to re-establish the city's infrastructure. At present, one of the most pressing issues is water contamination. It takes a special kind of person to be a "water worker," and in one volatile post-conflict environment. Repairing a water pipe or maintaining a pumping station can become an act of heroism for the workers. One farmer and his team members as a token of appreciation, explaining that he would now be able to return to supplying tomatoes, which he had previously been forced to sell due to the lack of water and the recent conflict.

Though little fighting took place in the area near the minefields, the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) reports that during the first half of May 2003, more than 80 percent of the mine/UXO victims known in northern Iraq were from the "new hazardous areas" that have been heavily impacted by recent fighting. Before the recent conflict, many mines were laid in the northern governorates of Iraq. The information is incomplete as to whether these two measures were enough to stop the UXO problem. Stockpiled munitions also present a dangerous problem for fishing or selling or to market UXO. The water of the various UXO areas has been affected socially and economically by landmines and UXO. In 2001 alone, about 30 people per month had been involved in accidents related to mines or UXO.

In southern Iraq, MineTech International has been working mostly with the Shikyming area of Basra, straddling the main access of advanced of the coalition forces as they went north. MineTech has not done much demining but rather has been busy with humanitarian clearance—removing cluster bombs and M-42 bombs left by coalition bombings of tank positions and road crossings. Unfortunately, the ground is so soft that a lot of the bombots have not gone off. Colonel Dyck explains that a lot of the farmers have been affected by cluster bombs. MineTech has been clearing areas where the main crops seem to be tomatoes. The locals are receptive and willing to help. One farmer gave them tomatoes as a token of appreciation, explaining that he would now be able to return to supplying tomatoes, which he had previously been forced to sell due to the lack of water and the recent conflict.

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