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Demining Efforts in Namibia

Previous mine clearance programs in Namibia started the country on a clear path towards demining success. Unfortunately, a current lack of funding and a spillover of the longstanding conflict in Angola have thwarted progress.

by Whitney Toller, MAIC

Overview of the Situation

On May 14, 1998, during a ceremony marking the last minefield-clearing task in the Ovaherero region of Namibia, General Jameson, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. European Command described the country as "a model for Africa and the world."1 The Namibian Defense Force (NDF) and Namibian police officers, trained and supported by the governments of Namibia and the United States, significantly reduced the number of landmine casualties during a three-year demining program. The number of deaths due to landmines and UXO fell from 10 in 1994 to just one in 1997, a 90 percent reduction. The number of injuries dropped as well, although not as drastically. As the end of the General's speech he concluded, "The decline in casualties means that the citizens of the northern regions of Namibia are safer now than they were before and that human suffering has declined."2

Unfortunately, since that time, the number of casualties has once again increased, especially in the northern regions of the country. As of early 1999, Namibia became subject to the same threats associated with the longstanding conflict occurring in the neighboring states of Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Angolan National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebel movement crossed the border into the northern region of the country, laying new minefields open to innocent civilians. Thus, Namibian prior goal of becoming one of the first countries in the world to successfully complete the Ottawa Treaty received a major setback. As Colonel T.J. Thye, Chief Inspector of Explosives for the government of the Republic of Namibia stated in a report, "Up to the end of 1999, the mine problem in Namibia was finite and well-known; it could be solved rapidly with appropriate measures."3 Now the government desperately needs renewed funding in order to clean up these new areas before foreign officials can once again declare Namibia a model country on the road to success.

History

Before Namibia gained its independence from South Africa in March 1990, the South African Defense Force (SADF) mined the northern regions of the country heavily. By the end of 1986, more than 352,000 square meters of minefields had been placed around eight military and police bases, two water supply towers and the pylons on the Ruckaqua high-tension power line. Fortunately, in most cases, the SADF properly marked, mapped and fenced in these minefields.

First Phase of Mine Clearance

With the implementation of United Nations Resolution 435 in 1989, South African troops conducted the first mine clearance project in Namibia. The project was used to further develop mine clearance techniques. Electricity Supply Corporation (SWAWEK) to clear minefields surrounding the Ruckaqua power lines. They used the same grid roller method as the SADF to clear the berms left next to the pylons. However, even after the final sweeping phases of the fields, uncleared landmines and UXO were found and detonated by civilians and livestock.

Government Involvement

As the second phase of the demining process was concluding, the Namibian government assumed the responsibility of all mine clearance and mine awareness programs. On May 19, 1992, a Namibian Cabinet resolution halted a second contract for the clearance of minefields surrounding former military base by Namibia Blasting Agents.4 The resolution instead gave the NDF the explicit orders to clear all minefields and soldiers, AT mines, and told the Explosives Unit of the Namibian police to remove and destroy all military ordnance and UXO across the former war zone. Unfortunately, both the NDF and the Explosives Unit lacked the sufficient number of clearance experts and equipment necessary to successfully complete the projects.

The Ministry of Home Affairs also created the first Namibian Public Awareness Unit (PNU) to identify both military and AT mines in the country. As such, PNU had the dual responsibility of helping the Namibian Police remove UXO and AT mines, and told the Explosives Unit of the Namibian police to remove and destroy all military ordnance and UXO across the former war zone. Unfortunately, both the NDF and the Explosives Unit lacked the sufficient number of clearance experts and equipment necessary to successfully complete the projects.

Current Status

Although demining efforts increased with U.S. involvement, the current number of casualties has recently risen in the northern regions of Namibia. This most recently occurred in the regions of Kavango and Capviri. In 1997, landmine casualties were listed as one killed and 10 injured for the year.1 But during the following year, these numbers increased to three killed and 22 injured and police reports from 2000 indicate 14 killed and 125 injured from landmines.

In addition to an increase in the number of casualties, the types of incidents responsible for landmine civilian casualties have changed percentage-wise.

References


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