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Demining Efforts in Namibia

by Whitney Toller, MAIC

Overview of the Situation

On May 14, 1998, during a ceremony marking the last minefield-clearing task in the Ohangwena 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." The Namibian Defense Force (NDF) and Namibia police deminers, 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 1997 was dramatically. As the end of the General's speech he concluded, "The decline in casualties means that the citizens of the northern region of Namibia are safer now than they were before and that human suffering has declined." Unfortunately, since that time, the number of casualties has once again increased, especially in the northern regions of the country. As of the end of 1999, Namibia became subject to the tenets associated with the longstanding conflict occurring in the neighboring state of Angola. The Namibian National Union for the Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebel movement crossed the border into the northeastern region of the country, laying new minefields open to innocent civilians. Thus, Namibia's prior goal of becoming one of the first countries in the world to successfully comply with the Ottawa Treaty received a major setback. As Colonel J.T. Thyes, 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." Now the government desperately needs renewed funding in order to clear the newer 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 Rucavaca high-tension power line. Unfortunately, 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 535 in 1989, South African troops conducted the first mine clearance project in Namibia. The project was due to the removal of approximately 200,000 square meters of cleared, and the SADF used the same grid roller method as the SDPE to clear the berms left next to the pylons. However, even after the final sweeping phases of the fields, unexploded 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 Namibia Cabinet resolution halted a second contract for the clearance of minefields surrounding former military bases by Namibia Blasting Agents. The resolution instead gave the NDF the explicit orders to dispose of all UXO, unexploded ordnance 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 project.

The Ministry of Home Affairs also created the first Namibian Public Awareness Campaign. The primary goal was to inform the public of the dangers of UXO and how to mark and report landmine and UXO findings to the proper authorities. While the NDF and the Explosives Unit struggled to find funding and demining expertise for their programs, the public awareness campaign received a great deal of national and international attention. National radio and television services cooperated in launching the program while international UNO Ammunition Appraisers broadcast the dire situation the Namibian people faced.

U.S. Involvement

U.S. attention focused on Namibia for two reasons. The first arose from the failed demining missions. The United States showed concern over the continued detonation of AP mines in supposedly "cleared" minefields. The second generated from the effective public awareness campaign. In response to their concerns, the United States signed the Memorandum of Understanding with the government of the Republic of Namibia in 1995. As a result, the Demining Liaison Committee was formed, and the U.S. military began training the NDF and Namibian police deminers. As the two governments worked together, minefields were cleared, fences were taken down and land was finally returned to the community. Towards the end of the project, as General Jameson said during a final mine clearing ceremony in 1996, had great hopes for Namibia. The country was almost completely mine-free and the NDF and the police Explosives Unit were properly trained in landmine clearance. The official U.S.-sponsored demining program concluded on February 8, 2001, but at the time of their withdrawal, the Namibian officials donated more than $2 million (U.S.) in earthmoving equipment, detection devices, computers and radio communication equipment to the NDF.

Current Status

Although demining efforts increased with U.S. involvement, the current number of casualties has recently risen in the northern regions of Namibia, most notably the regions of Kavango and Capriv and. In 1997, landmine casualties were listed as one killed and 10 injured for the year. 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.

From June 1999 to December 1999, Namibia registered 8,428 percent of all landmine incidents, AP mines for 5.8 percent and AT mines for 6.7 percent. During the period from January 2000 to March 2001, UXO percentages fell to 71.2 percent, while AP and AT mines rose to 21.9 and 6.0 percent respectively.

This increase is due to a spillover from the long-running conflict between Angolan UNITA forces and Angolan government forces—Forças Armadas Angolanas (FAA)—across the northern border. In 1999, Namibia granted the FAA the use of NDF military bases along the border for the purpose of defensive attacks against UNITA forces in southern eastern Angola. However, the FAA has also used these bases for the stockpile and transportation of ammunition. According to a 2001 report, the Landmine Monitor stated that there have been allegations that these ammunition include AP and AT mines.

Conclusion

A major problem still exists in Namibia. UXO and recently placed AP mines from the Angolan conflict continue to take innocent lives. The NDF and Explosives Unit lack the adequate personnel and budget necessary to eradicate the problem. Mine awareness campaigns, although very effective, fail to reach the local population, especially the people who need it the most. Inconsistent maps and minefield reports make 108 percent accurate and mine removal nearly impossible. The once seemingly simple landmine problem in Namibia has again been complicated. The Namibian government needs additional support to once again become a "model to Africa and the world."]

References

1. Colonel J.T. Thyes, The Namibian Experience. 2. Colonel J.T. Thyes, E-mail: tollerw@ma.edu

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