

August 2002

## Ethiopia, Meet Eritrea: An Overview of the Landmine Situation in Ethiopia and Eritrea as a Result of the Border Conflict

Susanna Sprinkel

*Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)*

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### Recommended Citation

Sprinkel, Susanna (2002) "Ethiopia, Meet Eritrea: An Overview of the Landmine Situation in Ethiopia and Eritrea as a Result of the Border Conflict," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol6/iss2/15>

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## Ethiopia, Meet Eritrea: An Overview of the Landmine Situation in Ethiopia and Eritrea as a Result of the Border Conflict

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Sparked by a controversy over Eritrean seaports, Ethiopia and Eritrea were drawn into a three-year border war that took numerous lives and permanently injured an already struggling economy. Now that the fighting has ceased and negotiations are being conducted, United Nations and humanitarian aid organizations are working to piece the two broken nations back together and eliminate the landmine threat.

by Susanna Sprinkel, *MAIC*

### Introduction

Stick two children in a room together, and they will immediately become friends. Give one of them a toy, and the other is likely to go through extreme measures to take it away. Ethiopia, meet Eritrea. Although the two countries are in no way like children, the story of the border war is much the same. Once Eritrea gained independence in 1993, it became close allies with neighboring country, Ethiopia. Years later, a number of upsets occurred between the two nations that broke out into a full-fledged border dispute lasting from 1998 to 2000. One might wonder how two nations who were once close friends could turn so quickly into bitter enemies. It is simple; they both wanted what they felt was rightfully theirs. The result was years of bloodshed and a mass of landmines/UXO that would cripple the economy for years to come.



Eritrea's independence left Ethiopia landlocked.  
[Click to enlarge map](#)

### History

Conditions between the two nations began to sour in 1997, when Eritrea attempted to establish its own currency, which they hoped could be easily exchanged throughout both nations. Later, when Ethiopia started issuing maps with the Ethiopian Tigray Region expanding across Eritrean territory, hostilities were exacerbated. These along with a number of other frustrations led Eritrea to believe that Ethiopia was planning to seize their land. Ethiopia had lost all of its seaports once Eritrea, which lies along the Red Sea, became an independent nation. In July of 1997, Ethiopia invaded the Eritrean village Bada, and relations continued to go down hill from there.

### Overview of Landmine Problem

Both countries were infested with landmines/UXO prior to the border conflict, which not only halted clearance operations but also increased the number of unexploded artilleries. The full extent of the problem is unknown at this time, but as a part of peace and demilitarization efforts, both countries have provided minefield records to the United Nations. Recent estimates place 200,000–250,000 leftover landmines and three million UXO in Eritrea alone.<sup>1</sup> The areas that pose the greatest risk as a result of the conflict are in the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ) that lies between the two nations and in the disputed Tigray Region. Since May 2000, 157 reported casualties have occurred in the TSZ, and it is likely that many more have gone unreported.<sup>2</sup>

## Mine Action Operations

### *Coordination*

The United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea Mine Action Coordination Center (UNMEE MACC) is coordinating mine action activities in Ethiopia and Eritrea. UNMEE MACC is working in conjunction with the Ethiopian Mine Action Office (EMAO) and the Eritrean Mine Action Programme (EMAP) to further develop their clearance, surveying, quality assurance, mine risk education and victim assistance capacity. Over the course of 2002, UNMEE MACC plans to train additional demining teams, including Mechanical Demining and Mine Detection Dog (MDD) teams, perform a Landmine Impact Survey of contaminated areas and develop a rapid response network.

### *Clearance and Surveying*

In Eritrea, seven non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have sent teams to perform clearance and surveying activities. These include the Eritrean Demining Agency (EDA), the Danish Church Aid (DCA), the Danish Demining Group (DDG), HALO Trust, RONCO and RONCO/EDA. Altogether they have over 60 manual clearance, mechanical clearance, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), MDD, survey and marking teams working in Eritrea. Current clearance efforts are focused on the TSZ, and plans are being made for activities in other contaminated regions.



UNMEE Slovakian deminer at work. c/o UN/DPI

### *Mine Risk Education*

As refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) return to their native lands, there is an increased need for Mine Risk Education (MRE) in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The greatest concern is for the children who have been separated from their families during the dispute. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) is working with the UNMEE MACC to develop MRE programs in refugee camps and other high priority areas. MRE efforts are being focused on the Tigray and Afar regions of Ethiopia and several high-risk communities in Eritrea. These efforts include developing a classroom mine awareness curriculum and airing radio broadcasts of the local problem. Additionally, UNICEF officials plan to train aid and relief workers not only how to avoid the landmine threat but also how to spread awareness to others.

## Conclusion

Even though Ethiopia and Eritrea are two of the world's poorest countries, both were fully equipped with artilleries from previous conflicts. Governmental and humanitarian organizations are now working to restore the economic stability of both nations who lost nearly 100,000 lives in this brutal dispute. On April 13, 2002, a clear borderline was finally established, and one can only hope that these two countries, whose people are exhausted from fighting and fleeing, can become allies once more.

## References

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## Contact Information

Susanna Sprinkel  
Mine Action Information Center  
Tel: (540) 568-2810  
E-mail: [sprinksl@jmu.edu](mailto:sprinksl@jmu.edu)



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