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Namibia

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by David Hartley, MAIC

History

Like many countries in southwestern Africa, Namibia has had a troubled military and political history. Germany occupied the nation until 1914, at which point the League of Nations entrusted South Africa with administration and control. This instigated a long period of hostility between Namibia and South Africa. Upon the dissolution of the League of Nations, the newly formed United Nations requested South Africa's withdrawal from Namibia. In 1966, the United Nations officially withdrew South Africa's Mandate, but hostilities merely intensified. South Africa did not relinquish control until 1990, after repeated UN requests and years of fighting. In the years since, Namibia has provided assistance and hospitality for the Angolan government forces in their war against Angolan rebels. This involvement has brought both turmoil and controversy to Namibia.



Landmine/UXO Overview

While the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) concluded that Namibia's landmine situation is neither urgent nor devastating, the problem is growing. The densely populated northern regions of Namibia, which are near Angola, are contaminated with landmines and UXO. Both Angolan rebel forces (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, or UNITA) and Angolan governmental forces (Angolan Armed Forces, or FAA) have been accused of using AP mines. The number of mines in Namibia, although an extremely speculative figure, is expected to be relatively small and controllable.

Casualties

Statistics of casualties in Namibia are very unreliable. Even official sources publish contradictory figures. It is clear, however, that the presence of Angolan armed forces in Namibia has markedly increased APM and UXO casualties. Unsurprisingly, UXO and abandoned munitions represent a greater threat than the presence of APM. Although the HIV/AIDS epidemic is Namibia's greatest concern, some sources report as many as 1000 APM/UXO casualties stemming from the country's involvement in the Angolan civil war.

Demining

The majority of Namibia's demining efforts have been supervised and funded by the United States. Implementing a "train-the-trainer" program, the United States has developed more than 100 Namibia Defense Force (NDF) military deminers, 20 police deminers and 20 medical personnel. Through these efforts, more than one million square meters of land have been cleared for civilian use. Unfortunately, APM/UXO casualties have occurred on previously cleared land. On January 11, 2001, a nine-year-old boy was killed by a mine or UXO in the Kaokoland district of Namibia. The land had supposedly been cleared of landmines.

Reality Check

In 1999, Namibia gave the FAA permission to use its territory as a military tactical center. These forces attacked UNITA rebels in southeastern Angola from Namibia. In addition, Angolan government troops used Namibian territory to store and transfer weapons and ammunition. Allegedly, these military supplies include AP and AT mines. Despite the presence of mines and UXO in Namibia, the problem is finite and well-known. With proper treatment, Namibia could declare itself free of landmines in the near future.

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