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Rwanda

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by JJ Scott, MAIC

History

Ethnic conflicts have troubled Rwanda for over 50 years, resulting in nearly continuous warfare and bloodshed. Prior to 1959, a monarchy led by the minority Tutsi ethnic group dominated the region's politics, persecuting the majority Hutus. That year, the Hutus rebelled and overthrew the Tutsi government before imposing a violent retribution on thousands of Tutsi civilians, driving 150,000 of them into exile. The children of these banished Tutsis formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and returned to Rwanda in 1990, sparking a civil war. The RPF eventually defeated the Hutu regime, but they first had to endure the genocidal murder of nearly 800,000 of their Tutsi compatriots in April 1994.

The internal situation has settled down since a 1998 peace agreement was signed, though Rwanda remains involved in several regional wars, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Also, small bands of Hutu extremists periodically carry out raids and kidnappings within Rwanda. Despite all of these potential barriers, the nation remains committed to the reconciliation of its peoples and the rebuilding of its political, economic and social institutions. In March 1999, Rwanda held its first democratic local elections—a positive step in a country that desperately needs reasons for optimism.



Landmine/UXO Overview

The Rwandan civil war resulted in a moderate landmine and UXO problem within the country. Tentative estimates place the number of mines in Rwanda around 50,000. Both the government and rebel groups employed landmines haphazardly, resulting in minefields with indefinable borders. Many suspected minefields in Rwanda are also farmer's fields. The government is hesitant to restrict access to such important lands, so they do not fence these areas, leaving farmers to decide independently which of their fields are too risky to enter. The northwestern and northeastern regions of Rwanda were the most heavily contaminated by landmines after the war, though much demining progress has been made in the northeast. As in most former war zones, the UXO problem in Rwanda is at least as great as the nation's landmine problem, though sketchy

statistics prevent accurate UXO estimates.

Casualties

Rwanda has no central repository for landmine victim statistics; hence the only available data comes from casualty records in registered medical centers. To be included in these numbers, a victim would have to be lucky enough to make it to a registered medical center and then be correctly categorized by the statisticians. This almost assures that the official casualty numbers (24 landmine casualties in 2000; four in January 2001) are incomplete and do not include many landmine victims. Also, the government of Rwanda provides no assistance to mine victims, instead leaving this task to Handicap International (HI) and the Mulindi Japan One Love Project.

Demining

The National Demining Office (NDO) is the coordinating body for all mine action activities within Rwanda. The NDO's sole economic sponsor is the United States, which has provided over \$14 million (U.S.) to the demining program since 1995. Negotiations are currently underway between the two nations to renew their aid agreement, which expired in June 2001. All demining in Rwanda ceased between December 1999 and June 2000 because of an explosives shortage. However, in the first seven months following the resumption, deminers destroyed nearly 3,000 landmines and assorted UXO. Overall, the NDO reports that they have destroyed 22,154 landmines of the estimated 50,000 within the country. Deminers are concentrating on clearing the northwestern portion of the country for resettlement, development and tourism.

Reality Check

Though no group has placed landmines within Rwanda since 1998, troubling reports are trickling out of the Democratic Republic of the Congo indicating that Rwandan forces may be planting mines within that nation; at the very least, the Rwandan military is assisting Congolese rebel groups who are using landmines in their fight against the government. Either of these allegations, if proven true, would be a violation of Rwanda's obligations under the Mine Ban Treaty, which the nation ratified in June 2000.

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