

Mine Risk Education in Uganda

Although Uganda declared itself mine-free in 2012, explosive remnants of war (ERW) still contaminate the country. To prevent resulting deaths and injuries, ERW risk education must be accessible to civilians.

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Due to rebellions against the Ugandan government and the actions of the National Resistance Army in the 1980s, Uganda was contaminated with landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), two key rebel groups, contributed to the mine/ERW contamination and the displacement of tens of thousands of individuals.¹

These conflicts resulted in contamination of Uganda's borders with South Sudan and Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as the Luwero Triangle, West Nile region and the Rwenzori Mountains. To address related humanitarian issues, Uganda established the National Mine Action Center at the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) in 2005. In July 2005, the National Mine Action Programme was inaugurated under the responsibility of the OPM to formulate an integrated response for the 13 mine/ERW-affected districts.² In November 2012, Uganda completed landmine-clearance operations and declared itself mine-free. However, some mines may remain in Agoro along the border between Uganda and South Sudan. Although all known cluster munition remnants were cleared, ERW such as grenades and small arms remain. At least 2,770 mine/ERW casualties (531 killed/2,239 injured) were identified by the end of 2013.³ Seven of these casualties (2 killed/5 injured) were from ERW incidents that occurred in 2013.

The pending conclusion of the peace agreement and the imminent threats of attack by the ADF make it critical for Uganda to protect its citizens by establishing a sustainable MRE program.

Mine Risk Education in Uganda

In the Agoro and Ngomoromo minefields and the internally displaced person (IDP) camps of the Lamwo district, mine risk education (MRE) was offered as a part

of OPM demining efforts funded by the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP). The MRE project was intended to reduce the risk-taking behavior of communities, increase their capacity to identify and manage threats, and raise awareness of the dangers of mines/ERW. With the aid of community-liaison operators, MRE aimed to prevent communities in IDP camps from returning to their home villages, which were highly contaminated with mines. At the conclusion of the demining operations in these areas, the OPM-sponsored MRE programs also closed.

Due to inadequate documentation, information on organizations conducting MRE in Uganda, including the time period covered, was not adequately captured. Different reports reference different dates; this has made determining the correct time frame difficult.

With the exception of OPM's operations in the Lamwo district, the Ugandan government lacked a clear strategy, policy or program to implement MRE. As a result, civil society organizations implemented MRE separately. The following organizations provided MRE in Uganda:

Association of Volunteers in International Service (AVSI). AVSI coordinated with government and community leaders to provide MRE. As a result of national collaboration, AVSI developed sensitization material for training and networking with other agencies and partners in the mine action sector. At the regional level, AVSI established partnerships that led to developing consistent, yet flexible, MRE training programs. AVSI also built the capacity of district personnel to help design effective MRE programs. At the community level, AVSI trained IDP camp leaders as community-based MRE educators, enhancing the level of MRE information gathered and shared within the community. Camp leaders and district facilitators used drama and group discussions to target communities. In an effort to spread risk awareness, AVSI distributed a



A medical worker helps an ERW survivor.
Photo courtesy of UNDP.

variety of materials with MRE slogans and messages, including booklets, posters, T-shirts, stickers, exercise books, music CDs and cassette tapes. It distributed these materials in the Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, Kotido and Lira districts.

AVSI trained community leaders to be MRE educators in the region, enabling the communities to provide MRE directly to citizens. MRE also led to behavioral changes. For instance, the number of people capable of recognizing landmines increased. Deminers used location data provided by civilians to determine where landmines were emplaced. Community members traveled in groups of two or more, so that if they encountered a suspected object, one person could remain behind while another left to notify the army to remove the objects. Risky behaviors, such as returning to villages after LRA attacks decreased, minimizing the number of accidents.

As a result of community engagement, the Uganda People's Defence Force recovered 20 anti-tank mines and 84 bombs in the Amuru, Bundibugyo, Gulu, Lira, Kasese, Kitgum, and Kotido districts by September 2003.⁴

Anti-Mines Network-Rwenzori (AMNET-R). AMNET-R is an action group of teachers from Rwenzori High School. AMNET-R worked with school clubs as well as community and survivor groups in Kasese to provide MRE and victim assistance, promote peace and advocate for the universal observance and protection of human rights. Handicap International supported AMNET-R by providing MRE, financial resources and training and material support.

Danish Demining Group (DDG). DDG focused on MRE for children and IDPs who graze animals, collect firewood, fetch water and play outdoors. Because the land was contaminated with mines/ERW, these everyday activities put children and IDPs at higher risk.

Handicap International (HI). In western Uganda, HI developed an MRE training manual to guide AMNET-R. HI also produced radio programs that targeted a wider audience than was possible with other types of MRE messages, as well as MRE posters, comic books and T-shirts for children and youth, and a 15-minute script for an MRE film.

Challenges of MRE in Uganda

Only a small amount of MRE was provided during demining and the coverage remained limited to the most heavily affected communities. MRE also ended in conjunction with the completion of mine clearance. Organizations that implemented MRE documented their activities and progress poorly. To date, there is no known mechanism to deal with residual risks.

In addition, it was anticipated in 2001 that many new partners and actors in mine action would emerge by 2005 or 2006, but this did not happen. AVSI, HI and AMNET-R possessed limited resources for MRE. With the exception of Gulu, Lira, Kasese, and Kitgum, affected districts only benefited from the UNDP-funded OPM MRE component of the demining program.

There is no adequate sustainable MRE program in Uganda to educate at-risk communities, especially children, about the residual mines/ERW. Although Uganda declared itself mine-free, such threats could still wash up or become exposed after heavy rain. In addition, it is likely that ERW may still be hidden in houses within the affected communities.

The lack of a comprehensive government strategy for MRE hinders the establishment of an institutional network to coordinate national MRE efforts. Coordination is required to bring local governments, nongovernmental organizations, hospitals, schools and communities together for effective and sustainable MRE.

Mainstreaming MRE

One avenue of providing MRE is to include it in the Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) Programme, a nationwide program executed by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development that began in 1992. Aimed at increasing accessibility to information and eradicating poverty, this program teaches literacy and mathematic skills as well as skills in agriculture, health, child care, HIV/AIDS, gender issues, etc., an organized structure that provides at least one FAL class for every village. By including MRE, the FAL Programme educates parents on the dangers of mines/ERW, enabling parents to educate their children thereafter.

However, the implementation of the FAL Programme was destabilized during the LRA insurgency. Since the return of IDP's to Uganda, there has been no government initiatives to support and strengthen the FAL Programme in post-war communities.

MRE integration into the FAL Programme would provide two significant benefits: It would strengthen MRE and increase adult literacy education in the region.

In order to integrate MRE into the FAL Programme, the following steps should be taken:

- Generate MRE course units
- Incorporate MRE into curriculum
- Mobilize additional resources
- Print and distribute copies of MRE educational materials
- Routinely monitor and support supervisors
- Train instructors as MRE educators

Pending funding, a national MRE program should be designed and delivered as part of the Victims Assistance Programme, run by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development to strengthen and expand MRE in Uganda's communities.

Conclusion

Although Uganda was declared mine-free in 2012, other ERW and residual risks remain, threatening the population. MRE can be strengthened and sustained to protect these individuals. The Ugandan government could implement a national MRE strategy by integrating MRE into the FAL Programme and targeting local communities with Uganda's Victims Assistance Programme. However, any steps to incorporate a MRE component into these programs are currently pending until additional government funds are provided for these programs. ©

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News Brief

Distinctive Pattern Found in IED Survivors' Brains

New research offers insight into brain trauma incurred by improvised explosive devices (IED), a problem affecting survivors of blast-related injuries since World War I. These findings mark the first time modern pathology was used to examine long-lasting effects of explosions on the brain.^{1,2}

Individuals suffering brain damage from IED explosions experience cognitive and psychological difficulties. Previously known as shell shock, this concept is called blast neurotrauma or blast injury to brain. Recently, the problem resurfaced as a health concern in the United States, as soldiers return from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.³

Eight researchers from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland, (United States), studied the brains of five male U.S. military veterans who survived IED attacks and later died. The research data showed a distinctive brain pattern, which differs from that of brain damage caused

by car crashes, drug overdoses and collision sports. The broken and swollen nerve fibers of IED-blast victims resemble a honeycomb pattern, and are found throughout critical brain regions including the frontal lobes, which control decision-making, memory, reasoning and other functions. This may explain some of the difficulties IED survivors face, such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress.^{1,3}

According to researchers, these new findings "may be the never-before-reported signature of blast injuries," which soldiers suffer. Researchers did not observe the honeycomb pattern in any other type of brain injury.³

This discovery will help doctors more effectively treat IED survivors. Although a fundamental step toward understanding how IED blasts affect the brain, more research is needed to determine the impact over time.^{2,3}

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~ Julie Stern, CISR staff