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Kurdistan’s Erbil Mine Action Center

The Erbil Mine Action Center (EMAC) of the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency increases mine risk education efforts in the spring to reduce high casualty rates during this season. EMAC also conducts landmine clearance in Iraqi Kurdistan.

by Jamal J. Hussein [Erbil Mine Action Center]

The spring season is a busy time in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. Several national holidays, such as Newroz (Kurdish New Year), fall between March and April, and many Kurds celebrate by enjoying picnics in mountain locations, green areas and along riverbanks. Similarly, many residents begin planting crops and gathering herbs in the spring, an act that often occurs near or within contaminated areas. These outdoor activities result in an increased number of injuries from landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) during the spring.

Erbil Mine Action Center’s Role

To reduce the number of casualties, the Erbil Mine Action Center (EMAC) at the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency (IKMAA) increased mine risk education (MRE) activities in the spring. Funded by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), EMAC issues safety instructions and MRE teams perform special awareness training in mine and ERW affected areas.

KRG provides all sustainable funding for mine action in the Kurdistan region. At IKMAA’s request, some short-duration projects, such as MRE and trainings, received limited funding from outside parties (e.g., UNICEF, Handicap International and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining). Funding from outside agencies is not a reliable and ongoing source; funds received vary from year to year.

Delivering MRE

MRE teams are composed of locally trained staff that follow MRE awareness guidelines provided by EMAC. Beginning the first week of March and continuing until the end of April, teams conduct one special MRE session per affected district, making an effort to reach residents and nomadic families.

Each district in Kurdistan has its own security checkpoint. The MRE team provides posters and other MRE instructions to all persons passing through checkpoints. Through television, radio, security checkpoints and community presentations, MRE teams can effectively communicate MRE to villagers and communities prior to the spring season.

In spring 2012, EMAC visited 72 villages to deliver MRE and distributed more than 4,600 leaflets, booklets, posters, landmine photos and instructions, which benefited more than 2,000 men, women and children. In March 2013, these numbers were halved due to snow, rain and other inclement weather; therefore, MRE teams could not reach all planned targets. However, villagers responded positively and the casualty rate dropped during the spring seasons of 2011–2013 in targeted areas, suggesting that MRE awareness trainings may have made a difference.

EMAC also conducts MRE sessions for schoolteachers and students as needed, depending on available funding. In 2012,
EMAC Spring 2014 MRE Guidelines

1. Do not approach unfamiliar areas that you have not visited previously. Ask others who know the area if it is safe. Mined areas do not always have signs and most mines lie just beneath the surface.

2. Do not approach areas marked by mine signs (red triangle), rocks painted red and marked with the letters BM (Benchmark), previous military posts, battle areas, areas surrounded with barbed wire or locations with pictures of bone and ERW.

3. When gathering edible herbs, picnicking or pasturing animals, only enter areas known by the public to have no mine risk.

4. Do not approach, touch or throw objects at mines or unknown items because explosions can be fatal or cause severe injury.

5. Call the EMAC emergency number to report landmines, ERW and other threats, or to seek emergency help.
detectors or mechanical clearance machines; deliver more targeted MRE sessions to at-risk individuals; distribute safety messages through the Internet and mobile phones; and engage media to reduce the mine/ERW impact. According to IKMAA, 20 to 27 percent of Erbil governorate’s minefields were cleared and handed over to the owners.

EMAC’s mine action program still faces several key challenges. Kurdistan has little information available about the location of mines, such as original minefield maps. Although EMAC survey teams gather information about contaminated lands from villagers, this is a slow process. Kurdistan’s weather, specifically in winter due to snow and rain, inhibits demining in the mountains where many minefields are located. In addition, valleys, dense bush, vegetation and hard ground complicate Kurdistan’s demining terrain. Metal fragments still contaminate battle areas from the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), making metal detector use less efficient. Additionally, most minefields were disrupted. In some cases, local villagers attempted land clearance by disarming visible mines or removing mines from the minefield and stockpiling them in another location. Finally, staff turnover is a problem at EMAC; due to limited resources, skilled and qualified personnel leave the program for better salaries and less rigorous work.

Although faced with a multitude of challenges, EMAC’s efforts to rid Iraqi Kurdistan of landmines continue.

See endnotes page 51

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Teachers Trained</th>
<th>Number of Students Trained</th>
<th>Number of Educational Supervisors Trained</th>
<th>Number of Volunteers from Villagers Trained</th>
<th>Number of Villages Joined CBMRE Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>1,054</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014 to date</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. CBMRE training summary, January 2012–May 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Villages of CBMRE Project</th>
<th>Number of Beneficiaries</th>
<th>Number of MRE Aids Distributed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>670 Men</td>
<td>450 Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>517 Men</td>
<td>702 Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. CBMRE Project 2012–2013.

Jamal J. Hussein is a director general of the Erbil Mine Action Center with the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency and director of the Fria Society of Mine Action Professionals in Erbil, Iraq. In 1986, he earned a Bachelor of Science in chemistry at Salahadin University in Erbil. He began work in the field as a deminer in 1998 with Greenfield Consultants. He became a demining team leader in 1999 and a demining training instructor in 2000. He has worked with the U.N. Office for Project Services as a technical and safety guideline and training monitor.

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