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Country Profile: Egypt

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Country Profile: Egypt

In the 1940s, during World War II, Axis and Allied forces collided in the Western Desert, near El-Alamein, Egypt. Both sides used landmines as a means of limiting each other's mobility.¹ The conflict left 17 million landmines in the Western Desert.²

To this day, landmines still heavily impact the coastal region between El-Alamein and the Libyan border. Roughly 22 percent—22 million—of the world's landmines are found in either the Western Desert, Sinai Peninsula or Red Sea coast.³ The contamination in the Sinai Peninsula and Red Sea coast is due to the conflicts between Egyptian and Israeli forces in 1956, 1967 and 1973.^{4,5} The Egyptian government estimates that 22 percent of the total land area in Egypt unsafe.⁵ As of 2010, an estimated 248,000,000 sq m (61.3 acres) of land remains contaminated. Since this time, more clearance operations finished.⁶

In the Western Desert, anti-vehicle landmines include German Rieglmine 43 and Tellermine 35, 42 and 43 mines; Italian B-2 and V-3 mines; and British MK-5 and MK-7 mines. Anti-personnel landmines consist of British MK-2 and German S-type bounding fragmentation mines.³ Due to flooding and land erosion, these mines have scattered, and subsequently may be buried as much as 2 meters (6.6 feet) below the surface. In addition, the lack of maps, sketches and landmine data greatly hinder the clearance process. Egyptian landmines, including M71, TM46, T79, TS50 and Israeli mines, contaminate the Sinai Peninsula and Red Sea coast.⁴ AV mines constitute an estimated 22.5 percent of contamination in Egypt, while AP mines represent 2.5 percent. The remaining 75 percent is either explosive remnants of war or unexploded ordnance.⁶

The total number of landmine and ERW-related casualties remains unknown, but as of 2006, 696 persons were killed and 7,617 injured in the Western Desert. In 2010, 26 casualties (six killed/20 injured) were reported, down from 41 casualties (19 killed/22 injured) in 2009.⁷ Approximately 7,923 people were landmine victims, including 3,200 dead and 4,723 injured in the past 25 years.⁸

Egypt has not acceded to the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-*

personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMBC) because it claims that AP mines are essential to border security.⁹

Mine Action Overview

Through the Ministry of International Cooperation, the Executive Secretariat for the Demining and Development of the North West Coast acts as Egypt's mine action entity.⁷ The Egyptian Military Engineering Organization has existed since 1946 and conducts mine clearance operations.⁴ In 2010, the Executive Secretariat reported that the army cleared 2.9 million landmines and released 38,000,000 sq m (9,390 acres) of land to the public as part of Phase 1 of the Egypt Mine Action Project: North West Coast. Unfortunately, the project's second phase—originally planned for 2011—was delayed because of insufficient funding and recent political events.^{6,10}

In the past, the majority of the US\$3.4 billion in international funding came from the European Commission, Japan, Norway and the United States.⁵ In January 2012, the Egyptian-government body responsible for research funding, the Academy of Scientific Research and Technology, announced that it will fund trials of an innovative agriculture technique to neutralize landmines on Egypt's north coast. Early in 2004, Aresa Biodetection, a Danish biotechnology company, developed a strain of the mustard plant that "turns from green to red only in the presence [of] nitrogen oxide that leaks from landmines."¹¹ During Phase 1 of the project, seeds from *Arabidopsis thaliana* (modified mustard plant) will be dropped in a contaminated area. Phase 2 involves introducing bacteria that is attracted to iron, creating holes in the bodies of the landmines. In the final stage, sugar beets, rose periwinkles or tobacco plants will be planted. Enzymes in the roots of these plants absorb nitrogen (major component of TNT), which is predicted to disarm the mines. This potential clearance method has a large number of skeptics, and the project awaits approval from Egypt's military council.¹¹

Victim Assistance and Mine Risk Education

The Matruh governorate is the only entity conducting victim assistance in Egypt. Although physical rehabilitation services increased in 2010, all other victim assistance activities remained unchanged.⁷ No psychological data was collected on survivors. In 2010, the Executive Secretariat found that the Matruh governorate's services for survivors were inadequate.⁷ For survivors and their families, health and social assistance can often take years to obtain. Due to the difficulties in receiving compensation, which is up to 150 Egyptian pounds (US\$24.57 as of 30 August 2012) monthly or a one-time sum of about 2,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$327.60 as of 30 August 2012), many victims and survivors do not seek these benefits.¹²

In 2010, the Executive Secretariat for Mine Clearance and the Development of the North West Coast added landmine survivors and victims to a comprehensive database that will now be updated regularly. Also, training of trainers, production of MRE literature and the Mine Awareness Campaign (2010) are being pursued.¹³

Ongoing Challenges

Landmines still threaten the well-being of the Egyptian population. Furthermore, the 2011 Egyptian Revolution distracted the military, significantly slowed economic growth and curbed the demining process.¹⁴ Although the landmine issue is daunting, projects are underway to decontaminate Egypt. Once cleared of landmines, ERW and UXO, the people of Egypt will finally live safely; something that has not been possible since World War II. 🌐

~ Dan Braun, CISR staff

Contact Information

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery
James Madison University
MSC 4902
Harrisonburg, VA / USA 22807
Tel: +1 540 568 2315
Fax: +1 540 568 8176
Email: cisr@jmu.edu
Website: <http://cisr.jmu.edu>

Endnotes

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