October 2011

Clearing Minefields in Israel and the West Bank

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Clearing Minefields in Israel and the West Bank

Recent legislation in Israel has opened the door to demining in Israel and the West Bank. Roots of Peace campaigned for this legislation and will begin demining a village near Bethlehem before the end of 2011.

by Dhyan Or and Heidi Kuhn | Roots of Peace |

The Mine-Free Israel campaign, a humanitarian effort led by a coalition of organizations comprised of Roots of Peace, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Center for Regional Councils, Council for a Beautiful Israel, local authorities from mine-affected communities and landmine survivors, has paved the way for humanitarian demining in Israel and the West Bank. The campaign recently helped pass unprecedented mine-action legislation in Israel and raise public awareness about mines in the West Bank. According to the new law, the Israeli government established a national mine-action authority, with an annual budget of 27 million NIS (US$7.3 million), scheduled to begin humanitarian demining in Israel in early 2012. In order to mirror this policy shift in the West Bank, Roots of Peace, the coordinator of the cross-sector coalition mentioned above, adopted a minefield in Husan, a Palestinian village near Bethlehem and raised funds to begin demining there before the end of December 2011. With help from several foundations and individuals, including a legacy gift from Shirley and Paul Dean of Spiriterra Vineyards, Roots of Peace will remove the landmines and transform the field of death in the midst of Husan village into a field of life, where fruit trees can grow once again, and boys and girls can safely walk and play.

Minefield History

More than 1.5 million landmines laid during the 1950s and 1960s contaminate a combined area of 50,000 acres (200 square kilometers) in the Golan Heights, in the Arava Valley along the Jordan River. This includes more than 300,000 landmines contaminating 5,000 acres (20 sq. km.) of agricultural and residential land in the West Bank, with unexploded ordnance further making sites inaccessible. Mined areas in the region include some religious and World Heritage sites of high significance to Christianity, Islam and Judaism, especially the site known as Qafr el Yabud (Palace of the Jews) where many believe Jesus was baptized; Joshia crossed the Jordan River and Prophet Elijah is believed to have ascended into heaven. Approximately 3,000 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, as well as booby traps, surround ancient monasteries and places of worship belonging to a variety of religions and held sacred by billions of people around the world. Husan is a Palestinian village located about 4 miles (6 km) west of Bethlehem and 8 miles (10 km) southeast of Jerusalem, with a population of 6,000 people, half of which are children, and an area of 1,800 acres (7.4 sq. km.), 87 percent of which are classified as Area C administered solely by Israel. The remaining area is classified as Area B, jointly administered by both the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Between 1949 and 1967, a Jordanian police station surrounded by a mined minefield (containing both AT and AP mines) overlooked the Jordan-Israeli border from a hill within Husan. In 1993, when a bypass road (No. 375) was paved through the minefield to connect Beit Jar Hill with Jerusalem, it split the minefield into two parts: one, part south of the road, is fenced and marked and consists of 4.5 acres (18,211 square meters) of grazing and agricultural land; and the second part, north of the road, within a residential area of Husan, consists of 1.5 acres (6,070 sq. m.), and is unmarked, posing a constant threat to residents, especially children, who pass through it daily. Traces of

Published by JMU Scholarly Commons, 2013

Notes from the Field

Or and Kuhn: Clearing Minefields in Israel and the West Bank

A marked minefield near Hatzara, Israel. Photo courtesy of Roots of Peace

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2004 failed due to lack of public support. However, after an intensive public-relations campaign inspired by 11-year-old local landmine survivor Daniel Yuval who lost his leg to a landmine in the Golan Heights in 2010, 73 out of 80 rank-and-file members of parliament cosponsored the Minefield Clearance Act which was eventually passed, with active support of the government and the Prime Minister on 14 March 2011. According to the new legislation, the Israeli National Mine Action Authority was established, and tasked with the creation and implementation of the first national humanitarian-demining plan. In September 2011 INMAA published the first draft of the national mine-action standards, held a first meeting of its advisory committee, which includes members of government offices and public representatives, and announced two pilot projects in the upper Arava Valley to be conducted in 2012.

Demine-Replant-Rebuild Initiative in the West Bank

According to Israeli and international law, the Israeli law does not apply to the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Defense Forces have shared control of civilian and security affairs. Still, the recent policy shift was welcomed by both the PA and the IDF, and raised expectations for a parallel change in mine-action policy in the West Bank. In Husan, local residents, who have been disappointed time and again after failed appeals for the removal of the constant threat of landmines from the midst of their village, are expressing renewed confidence in the possibility of realizing this wish. Once cleared, the land could be returned to productive use, helping boost local economy, which is characterized by high unemployment rates. Following clearance, the local community is planning to replant olive trees, expand the homes of the large families living around the

To follow mine-action and ERW news from around the world, and access updates on CISR’s current projects and assistance activities, follow the CISR Blog through Tumblr: http://cisr.jmu.tumblr.com.

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Do you have questions or comments about our articles? Share them with us. The online version of The Journal now includes a commenting feature, allowing readers the opportunity to share information and start dialogues about each issue.

Roots of Peace praises The Journal as “an academic keepsake.” With The CISR Sphere, that status is elevated to an open global source for humanitarian-demining information. Experience how it feels to be a part of The CISR Sphere. You can comment and connect as soon as you sign in. Come visit and tell us what you think!

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ming process is still under way. 

to internationally recognized practices 

cal demining group working according 

ation in mine action in the country, help 

Looking to the Future 

 Roots of Peace’s pilot humanitarian- 
demining project in Humsheh, scheduled to 

susceptibility of children

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known as killing fields in Cambodia and devil’s 
gardens in Afghanistan, areas contaminated with 
explosive remnants of war pose for known for their im-
partiality when claiming victims, the majority of whom are 
children. In Southern Lebanon, submunitions continue to in-
jure and kill children returning home after the 2006 Israeli-
Hezbollah War when they mistake them for toys. In Laos, 
infamously the most bombed country in the world, children 
returning home from school are killed by handling submuni-
tions they find on the roadside. In May 2011, a submunition, 
which the victim believed to be a ball, killed a 13-year-old 
boy from Western Sahara who was herding animals, and an 
old cluster bomb killed three boys ranging in ages six to 12 
while they were playing in a garden in Southern Iraq. Also, 
Libyan children living amidst the ongoing civil war suffer in-
juries from cluster munitions and indiscriminate mortar and 
rocket fire.

Global Picture 

While civilians constitute roughly 70 percent of all casual-
ties caused by cluster munitions, landmines and other ERW, 
the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor reports that chil-
dren make up one-third of casualties worldwide. UNICEF 
reported that from 2008-2010, children accounted for half of 
all civilian casualties. Among child casualties, boys consti-
tute the highest percentage where the gender is known, com-
posing nearly three-fourths of all ERW casualties. In fact, 10 
countries report boys as their largest casualty group. 
ERW, however, also affect girls who are often more stigmatized for 
injuries. Their disabilities are seen as burdens to families, and 
as a result, girls represent an under-reported statistic. Along 
with an unfamiliarity of the various types of explosives and a 
tendency to play or work in hazardous areas, natural curios-
ity and a smaller body size render children more susceptible to 
the effects of ERW than adults.

Susceptibility of Children 

Since rural areas are most often affected, using land for 
farming, grazing, hunting, collecting firewood and various 
other activities often brings civilians into contact with ERW.
An inability to read and heed warning signs leaves children 
susceptible to mines, and their playful nature often leads to 
mistaking submunitions as balls, rations, soda cans or toys.
Furthermore, the presence of these explosives can effective-
ly nullify the land’s agricultural capability, affecting a com-
community economically while also threatening the community’s 
physical well-being, as the threat of detonating ERW is as 
potent as malnutrition and starvation. Inhabitants may be 
compelled to use the land for less lucrative purposes to avoid