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South Sudan: The Role of Bangladeshi Military Deminers

This article is an endeavor to give an overview of the mine and unexploded ordnance situation in South Sudan, highlighting the role of the Bangladesh Military Demining Platoon (formerly the Bangladesh Military Demining Company). Ultimately, their efforts served to clear 2,733,858 square meters (676 acres) in five of the country’s most affected areas.

A result a year of 20 years of armed conflict between the government of Sudan and non-state armed groups, Sudan is contaminated with mines and explosive remnants of war. As of December 2007, the Information Management System for Mine Action database contained records on 1,427 affected areas, and nearly three-quarters of the areas identified were located in South Sudan.

There are an estimated 4.8 million internally displaced persons in Sudan.

Although there has been relative peace in the country since 2005, refugees continue to encounter landmines and ERW as they return to their land.

During a conflict, combat engineers are trained to make lanes for assaulting offensive forces to reach a defensive area protected by minefields by breaching the minefield manually and by using mine rollers, flags or mine ploughs. Once it has been determined there is negligible enemy interference. Vipers or line charges are used to create safe lanes for the attackers or while conducting a tactical reposition.

Minefields in South Sudan are mostly seen along the main roads connecting the capital, Juba, with bordering towns in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. No pattern of laying mines can be discerned from demining operations carried out in this area.

Minefields and Danger Areas

Much of Sudan’s landmine-contamination problem comes specifically from the government’s fight with the Sudan People’s Liberation Army. Because the Second Sudanese Civil War lasted over 20 years and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was only signed in 2005, the SPLA is not yet confident enough to share its minefield records with the United Nations Mine Action Office in Sudan. Furthermore, many of the minefields laid during the war were not recorded, and from 1999–2004, despite the fact that the country signed the Mine Ban Convention in December 1997, the government, the SPLA and other rebel groups have all been suspected of continuing to replace anti-personnel mines.

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Commonly Found Mines

The major guerrilla battles were fought in the Juba, Kajo-Kaji, Kapoeta, Mafa, Rejaf, Rokon, Torit and Yei regions. The most commonly found types of UXO in South Sudan include mortar bombs, rocket-propelled grenades, various artillery rounds, wooden hand grenades and aerial bombs. Mine-risk education is needed to educate the local population about the dangers of UXO and ERW, as many villagers continue to use the mines as household items in their rakulis (local huts).

Mine and ERW victim map for South Sudan.

Requirement of Military Deminers

Until the 1980s, mine clearance was only a sector for combat engineers of different armies. When civilian demining companies began to get involved, professionals such as police officers, dog handlers and construction plant operators of the corps of engineers began working as deminers. Military deminers have an advantage over private companies and nongovernmental organizations in that they already have experience working in hostile environments. As a result, they can help lay the groundwork for other de- mining and humanitarian agencies to work in areas of recent conflict.
The military deminers work mainly as the peacekeeping force for U.N. missions in which peace enforcement is included in the mandated tasks.

Technical Survey and Manual Demining

Bangladeshi deminers began clearing Juba township and the surrounding neighborhood, the U.N. compound and the office areas for different ministries of South Sudan in March 2006. Until September 2009, the Bangladeshi Company engaged 137 sappers in humanitarian demining. By the end of March 2010, the deminers cleared approximately 2,628,858 square meters (650 acres) of land for safe use. In the process, the Bangladeshi deminers destroyed 6,358 anti-personnel mines and 399 anti-tank mines. Bangladeshi deminers worked in the following four minefields: Gudele with 13,137 square meters (three acres) cleared, Khor Ramla with 14,400 square meters (four acres) cleared, Mafao with 219,666 square meters (54 acres) cleared and Rajaf with 88,575 square meters (20 acres) cleared.

Data Item | Unit | Quantity Accomplished
--- | --- | ---
Area cleared | sq. m. | 2,733,858
Area surveyed/prepared | sq. m. | 65,786
AP mines destroyed | pieces | 6,359
AT mines destroyed | pieces | 399
UXO destroyed | pieces | 31,523
Area – BAC sub-surface | sq. m. | 172,575
Area – BAC surface | sq. m. | 2,322,706
Area – EOD | sq. m. | 40,142
Area – mechanical mine clearance | sq. m. | 117,712
Area – mechanical ground preparation | sq. m. | 65,786
Area – mechanical mine clearance | sq. m. | 58,688
Area – mine-detecting dogs (MDIs) | sq. m. | 127,035

Achievements of Bangladesh Military Demining Company.

EOD team's job was a technical one, often conducting sensitive tasks in risky situations. Occasionally, this activity resulted in the detonation of UXO on site. It is up to the leader to judge the situations and positions of the UXO. The team never performs any task without providing early warning to the local community. When a half-buried aerial bomb's position in a grave demanded an in situ disposal, the team discussed the situation with the locals, hoping to receive permission to detonate the bomb. Unfortunately, the local population became agitated; therefore, the team postponed the task and started dialogues with different members of the society, and the bomb has not yet been detonated. Negotiations are continuing with the tribal leaders. The EOD team destroyed 31,523 pieces of UXO and is in the process of disposing over 14,000 kilograms (30,864 pounds) of outdated explosives received from the SPLA.

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Battle Area Clearance

Bangladeshi military deminers have aided the local population through the clearance of battle areas. In particular, they cleared the Custom Market area, different ministry office areas, a 24,000 square meters (six-acre) dairy and poultry farm area near Mafao; a 41,800 square meters (10-acre) area near Jebel Kujoor, and numerous danger areas in Juba city. Through March 2010, the military deminers also cleared 1,408,800 square meters (348 acres) for the new United Nations Mission in Sudan headquarters.

Other Significant Contributions

In addition to demining, the military conducted the following activities:
- Clearing chemical hazards from all of Juba city
- Disposing of 9,485 landmines from Sudan Armed Forces and 5,000 landmines from SPLA in accordance with the Ottawa Convention
- Providing health-care support to the local communities
- Conducting mine-awareness activities during the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action and the International Day of Disabled Persons
- Visiting local schools to conduct informal mine-risk education for children

Challenges

Demining in South Sudan is an ongoing challenge. Weather, road conditions and the hostile attitude of some groups and tribes can restrict the deminers' mobility to the remote minefields and danger areas. Unorthodox mine-laying patterns and interaction with local wildlife can pose additional stress to the deminers in their work.

Conclusion

Hidden mines and UXO are a continual threat to aid workers, deminers and the local population of South Sudan. Rough weather, rugged terrain, restrictions on movement in

The author (center) with the schoolchildren after his informal MRE presentation at Loborok, South Sudan. 

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