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Burma (Myanmar)

by Stephen Powers [Mine Action Information Center]



Burma gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1948. Shortly afterward, the country plunged into civil war among various political groups while also facing an insurgency in the state of Karen. Over 50 years later, a military *junta* now controls the government and an insurgency remains in Karen. This near-constant state of conflict has resulted in the widespread use of landmines in both developed and underdeveloped parts of the country. The instability of the government and insecurity in many rural areas have made survivor assistance difficult and inconsistent.

State of Survivor Assistance in Burma

To this day, Burma remains one of the few countries where landmines are actively deployed. Burma's use of landmines has affected not only its own population but also that of neighboring countries. Landmines are used mainly along the eastern border with Thailand and the surrounding areas. Both Bangladesh and Thailand have signed the Ottawa Convention¹ and no longer use landmines; however, because of Burma's use of mines along the borders and resulting refugee problems, casualties have spilled over the borders. In addition to the human casualties, animals (particularly elephants) have been killed or injured by landmines.^{2,3}

The current state of survivor assistance in the country remains poor. The government has shown no interest in stopping the use of landmines in its struggle against the rebels in Karen and has largely ignored criticisms about the impact of landmines. The Ministry of Health is responsible for providing state assistance to survivors, but due to lack of funding, only a handful of facilities have been constructed,⁴ further limiting the necessary materials, training and personnel needed to provide comprehensive support.

In the absence of government intervention, the International Committee of the Red Cross has stepped in

to provide assistance. Currently the ICRC is one of the most active providers of victim assistance in Burma and has provided the most direct and indirect medical care for survivors. The ICRC supports seven rehabilitation centers, including the Myanmar Red Cross.⁵ If survivors can travel to the necessary locations, these facilities serve as some of the most reliable rehabilitation sites, but their scarcity limits accessibility.

The Burmese government does not conduct any specific data collection on the effects of landmines and unexploded ordnance. Casualty data collected are treated like data from any other trauma.⁴ The result is very poor information about the extent of landmine and UXO impact in many rural areas, hindering efforts to locate those most affected. Various nongovernmental organizations' attempts to collect data on landmine and UXO casualties have been opposed by the government and impeded by continued fighting in the country. Limited access to Karen and other remote areas has further decreased the ability of both the government and NGOs to determine accurately the extent of casualties. In this atmosphere, it remains difficult for anyone to know the impact landmines and UXO have on the population in Burma.

The ability for survivors to receive assistance in Burma largely depends on where the accident occurs; long-term help may require relocation. Facilities offering prostheses or training for survivors are found in limited areas and are largely backed by the ICRC. The ability of survivors to journey to these locations varies greatly and, because of instability and fighting, many Burmese cannot travel long distances to obtain aid. The government's lack of assistance and its continued use of landmines magnifies the size and scope of the problem. These challenges, coupled with the poor data collection on the extent and location of landmine and UXO injuries result in a bleak record of successful assistance for the country's survivors.

Conclusions

As long as the current conditions continue, the outlook for survivor assistance in Burma will remain poor and uncertain. With a lack of information about the extent of landmine contamination and casualties, plus the lack of resources for survivors, future efforts will continue to fail. Recent natural disasters have exacerbated problems for victim-assistance programs, especially given the government's reluctance to allow international aid groups into the country. Perhaps the international attention will force a positive step toward change for victims. However, if no sign of political change comes in the near future, the mine-action community can expect the conditions in Burma to worsen and the need for survivor assistance to increase in the coming years. 📌

Biography



Stephen Powers was an Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Mine Action* at the Mine Action Information Center from July 2007 through May 2008. He is currently attending graduate school at James Madison University.

Endnotes

1. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*, Oslo, Norway. 18 September 1997. <http://www.icbl.org/treaty/text/english>. Accessed 20 August 2008. The document was opened for signature in Ottawa, Canada, 3 December 1997, and is commonly known as the Ottawa Convention. Accessed 20 August 2008.
2. Moser-Puangsuwan, Yeshua. "Seeds of Destruction." *The Burma Project*. <http://www.burmadebate.org/archives/winter00seeds.html>. Accessed 20 August 2008.

3. **Editor's Note:** One elephant that was injured was named Motala, and the story of her injury and recovery can be read at: <http://animom.tripod.com/motala.html>. Accessed 20 August 2008.
4. "Burma/Myanmar." *Landmine Monitor Report 2007*. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2007/burma>. Accessed 20 August 2008.
5. International Committee of the Red Cross. "Myanmar" *Annual Report 2006*. [http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/738D24/\\$FILE/icrc_ar_06_myanmar.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/738D24/$FILE/icrc_ar_06_myanmar.pdf?OpenElement). Accessed 20 August 2008.

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