

Iraq

by Matthew Voegel [Mine Action Information Center]

Since 2003, the government of Iraq has taken action against mines and unexploded ordnance. On 15 August 2007, Iraq acceded to the Ottawa Convention¹ becoming the 155th State Party. The rising levels of violence in the region, however, have made focusing on mine action difficult for the Iraqi government—or anyone, for that matter. The decrease in security has taken focus, time and energy from ridding the country of its extensive problems with landmines and other explosive remnants of war.²

The Mine Situation

Iraq is one of the most ERW-contaminated areas in the world due to its turbulent history of internal violence and large-scale wars, such as the 1980–88 conflict with Iran, which left the border between the two countries devastated; the first Gulf War in 1991; and the most recent invasion by U.S.-led Coalition Forces in 2003. The largest areas of contamination span hundreds of kilometers along the border with Iran and also along the border with Saudi Arabia.³ The Landmine Impact Survey of Iraq was completed in only 13 of the 18 governorates due to the security situation in the remaining five governorates.⁴ The survey found 1,718 square kilometers (663 square miles) of contaminated land, the majority of which is agricultural.⁵ According to the ILIS, the Kurdish governorates in Iraq are some of the most contaminated areas of the world with 1,428 communities affected.⁶

Many communities are also affected by large amounts of unexploded ground and air ordnance, such as rockets used by Coalition Forces, along with a large quantity of abandoned explosive ordnance and ERW left by Saddam Hussein's Army. These abandoned explosives have led to casualties in the southern part of the country in governorates like Basra, Thi Qar and Missan.⁶

In addition to dealing with the threat of landmines and ERW, the situation with armed non-state groups using improvised explosive devices poses a huge problem. Whether the IEDs are victim- or command-activated,⁷ they are causing significant casualties among U.S. military personnel and Iraqi civilians.

Mine Organizations in Iraq

Because of the extent of the contamination in Iraq, there are many different organizations, governmental and nongovernmental, working within the country to help contain

the problem. These organizations include the National Mine Action Authority, the former Regional Mine Action Centre–North, the Regional Mine Action Centre–South, the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Centre and the United Nations Development Programme.

National Mine Action Authority. The NMAA was established in 2003 with support from the United Nations and was placed under the Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation. Its responsibilities included managing the budget for mine-action and donor relations, setting mine-action standards and maintaining a national database.⁶

The NMAA is also in charge of the organization of all mine-risk education in Iraq. In 2006, the United Nations Children's Fund collaborated with NMAA and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining to organize a three-day workshop in Amman, Jordan on communicating MRE in Iraq. During the workshop, officials agreed upon a plan of action for the rest of 2006, and focused on the needs of the northern and southern regions.⁶ To help educate children about landmines the NMAA ran a national media campaign, which included TV and radio spots. The TV spots were broadcast on *Sharquiyah*, the national Iraqi television station, and on the Arabic children's channel.⁶

However, the MoPDC issued a letter in the summer of 2007 to the Council of Ministers requesting the NMAA be moved to another ministry. As a result, the Office of the Prime Minister declared that the NMAA be disbanded under the MoPDC and the organization was made into a “non-functioning entity.”⁸ To complicate matters, Abdul Wahab Adwan, General Director of the NMAA since November 2006, was kidnapped in May 2007. As of this writing, there has been no news on his whereabouts.⁸ According to Iraqi officials at a meeting at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C., on 9 October 2007, the NMAA has been transferred to the responsibility of the Ministry of the Environment.

Mine Action Centers. In 2003 the NMAA set up three mine action centers in the country: the Iraqi Mine Action Centre in Baghdad,

which oversees all mine action in the city; a Regional Mine Action Centre–North, located in the city of Erbil; and RMAC–South, located in the city of Basra. RMAC's responsibilities include monitoring all mine-action activities in their respective regions, collecting and analyzing data, preparing plans and assigning clearance tasks, and monitoring quality assurance.⁶ In 2005, IMAC ceased to exist and thus the NMAA gained responsibility for all mine-action activities in the Baghdad area as well as fulfilling other IMAC duties.⁷

Between 1997 and 2003, the U.N. Office of Project Services was responsible for the Northern Iraqi Mine Action Program, using funds provided through the U.N. Oil for Food Programme. UNOPS was able to establish a number of local Kurdish demining NGOs. These Kurdish NGOs were transferred to RMAC–North when the UNOPS program was handed over to the NMAA and the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003.⁷ Then in 2004, the Kurdish regional government assumed responsibility of mine action in the three Kurdish governorates. RMAC–North was eventually revamped and renamed as the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Centre, which is still separate from NMAA. IKMAC oversees all mine-action activities in two of the three Kurdish governorates while the General Directorate for Mine Action manages mine action in the third.⁶

At the end of May 2005, IKMAC had cleared 533,273 square meters (132 acres) of land. Also in 2005, IKMAC—with the help of the Kurdish Regional Government—completed developmental projects such as laying power lines, water and sanitation projects, irrigation canals and restoring land for crops and tourist sites. IKMAC employed nearly 800 operations staff in 61 mine-action teams in the Kurdish governorates of Erbil and Dahuk at the start of 2006.⁶

United Nations Development Programme. The UNDP is the lead organization for U.N.-backed mine action in Iraq. The UNDP had worked closely with the NMAA before NMAA was disbanded and then reinstated under the Ministry of Environment; it is cur-

rently trying to help the Iraqi government create a formidable mine-action strategy for the country.⁵ Salomon Schreuder of the UNDP says it is the organization's view that “the only sustainable solution to the mine/ERW situation in Iraq is to develop national capacity to address the problem. All UNDP activities are thus focused on this approach.”⁵

Demining

The first phase of a three-year, US\$4 million Landmine Impact Survey of Iraq was finished in August 2007. With the completion of this first phase of the survey, funded by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Iraqi authorities were able to prioritize removal of the most dangerous explosives, clear over 13.8 million square meters (5.3 square miles) of productive land, and destroy nearly 140,000 pieces of unexploded ordnance and 13,000 landmines.¹⁰

Demining in Iraq is done by many groups including international forces, the national military, nongovernmental organizations and commercial demining operators.⁸ According to recent figures, from July 2003 to September 2007 an overall total of 103,041,000 square meters (25,462 acres) of contaminated area has been cleared.¹¹

In the three Kurdish governorates, international NGOs like the Mines Advisory Group and Norwegian People's Aid have helped the IKMAC with many of its mine-clearance activities.⁶ Also, the Iraq Mine and

UXO Clearance Organization (IMCO), which is supported by RONCO Consulting Corporation and funded by the U.S. Department of State, has been conducting demining operations in and around the cities of Baghdad, Najaf and Basra.⁸ IMCO has a total of 200 personnel, all of whom are Iraqi citizens and have been working within the Green Zone.¹¹

Facing Challenges and Moving Forward

The most pressing issues facing Iraq mine-action operators are the security situation and internal violence. “The situation seems to be getting worse as internal conflict escalates,” says Schreuder. “The main effect is that the available clearance capacity cannot be deployed in the high[ly] impacted communities as was established by the Iraqi Landmine Impact Survey; furthermore, special attention needs to be given to the security of mine-action operators contributing to an escalation in cost for mine action. This is of particular importance for international staff working in Iraq.”⁵

Along with the issue of security, the current disorganization of the government's mine-action strategy seems to be strengthening the burden. “The fact that the NMAA and the RMAC don't function properly results in difficulties to the mine-action organizations,” states Schreuder. “It is in particular the accreditation process that doesn't work properly and the lack of an effective quality-management system. The lack of government support also causes a lack of donor support.”⁵ However, with Iraq now being a State Party to

the Ottawa Convention, more pressure is now put on the government to put forth more effort to the cause, which will hopefully bring some good results for the future. ♦

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News Brief

Boeing Successfully Tests Avenger-mounted Lasers

Boeing recently announced that it has successfully tested the Avenger-mounted laser-beam system intended to neutralize the threats posed by improvised explosive devices and other unexploded ordnance. During late-September tests, the laser engaged and destroyed five targets representing IEDs and UXO.

Developed in only eight months, Boeing sought to demonstrate the importance of directed-energy technology in modern combat conditions. The laser was added to the Avenger, while retaining its ability to carry other weapons like missiles and a machine gun. The Laser Avenger also has the ability to use its laser beyond IEDs and UXO; a shoot-on-the-move capacity could allow the Avenger to destroy other targets.