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The Mine-action Process in Iraqi Kurdistan

The Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency has been working to clear Kurdistan of landmines and unexploded ordnance that were placed by the former Iraqi government over the past 40 years and the Iranian Army during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980–1988. The Agency is overcoming many challenges and has cleared a vast number of minefields so the land can be handed back to the owners. Casualties from explosive remnants of war are extremely high but a new mine-risk-education program will inform people who live in dangerous areas how to minimize the threat of explosive remnants of war.

by Jamal Jalaf Hussein [Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency]

The existence of landmines and unexploded ordnance in any community has a direct impact on the local people, especially in regard to their economic, social and physical well-being. The previous Iraqi governments systematically contaminated Kurdistan's land with mines.

Since the initiation of the Kurdish freedom revolution and other Kurdish struggles, this practice was continuously applied to Kurdish lands and was prolonged when the former Iraqi regime came to power in February 1963. An "Arabization" strategy was used in an attempt to change the demographics of northern Iraq whereby the Iraqi government displaced Kurdish families from their land and replaced them with Arab families from other areas of Iraq. In addition to dealing with this, during the consecutive conflicts that consumed all of Iraq and Kurdistan, huge areas of Kurdish land were heavily contaminated with mines and explosive remnants of war. This led to thousands of Kurdish citizens being killed or facing lifelong handicaps.

Clearance Goals

The vision of the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency is to rid Kurdistan of ERW. Currently the mission is to reduce the impact of mines and unexploded ordnance in the affected communities of Kurdistan. This will be achieved through the demining process (survey of contaminated communities, mapping, marking of hazardous areas, and destruction of mines and UXO), mine-risk education and victim assistance. It is a great challenge to clear mines from Kurdistan due to the difficulty of the demining process, the large areas that were contaminated and the approximate quantity of emplaced mines numbering in the millions.

Achievements

There are 3,512 registered minefields in Kurdistan. From the beginning of the demining process in Kurdistan in early 1993 through late 2004, a total of 567 minefields and battle areas have been cleared and returned to their owners.

Approximately 5,615,989 square meters (2.17 square miles) of mined areas have been cleared, with 25,226



A mine-detection dog handler and a trained mine-detection dog are searching a marked hazardous area for landmines.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

anti-personnel mines, 890 anti-tank mines and 273,404 pieces of UXO destroyed. Throughout 2005 and 2006 a total of 100,083 people have directly benefited from IKMAA's clearance, explosive ordnance disposal and MRE efforts.

Factors Influencing Demining Difficulties

Experience shows many factors directly affect the clearance process and lead to a slowdown in progress. The age of the minefields, as they are already 20–26 years old, leads to a number of complicating factors and difficulties in conducting demining operations. Some of these factors are related to Kurdistan's natural terrain and topography while other factors stem from the difficulty of mine clearance, the risks associated with mine clearance and difficulty of implementing the International Mine Action Standards due to safety concerns. Specific factors that affect mine clearance are:

- Limited period of time to work in some minefields due to weather
- Hard ground
- High, dry vegetation in most mined areas
- Lack of desire by deminers to work in mine clearance because of the threat of dealing with suspected areas
- The existence of high numbers of metal fragments that slow progress because mine-clearance personnel must check each square meter of ground with metal detectors. Most of Kurdistan's large minefields were battle areas during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988).

Governorate	Years of Accidents	Mine		UXO		Total	
		Injured	Killed	Injured	Killed	Injured	Killed
Duhok	1965-1989	165	87	43	6	208	93
	1990-2003	514	190	134	30	648	220
Erbil	1963-1989	469	275	261	79	730	354
	1990-2003	1000	584	959	289	1959	873
Sulaimaniyah	1950-1989	480	277	389	129	869	406
	1990-2003	2228	1409	1235	413	3463	1822
Kirkuk	1955-1989	124	94	89	43	213	137
	1990-2003	700	567	331	79	1031	646
	Total	5680	3483	3441	1068	9121	4551

Table 1: Mine and UXO victims in four Kurdistan governorates from 1950 to 2003.

- Unavailability of minefield information and maps—the former Iraqi regime did not release them to the United Nations or Kurdish demining organizations so there is no reliable information on the exact location of contaminated areas.
- Unintentional enlargement of minefields—villagers transferred mines from mined areas to previously safe areas. Most of the minefields have been disrupted; in some cases, local villagers have attempted to clear their land by collecting or disarming visible mines or by removing the mines from the minefield and stockpiling them in another area
- Emigration of mines from uneven or steep ground, especially in mountains due to rain and snow
- Shortage of modified clearance machines such as front-end loaders and excavators within the demining program
- Qualified and well-skilled deminers abandon the program for better salaries or easier jobs—it is a challenge to recruit veterans or skilled deminers to replace those leaving.

Other Activities

IKMAA presented its achievements and activities via a comprehensive demonstration at a photography exhibition on 4–5 July 2006 at Media Gallery in Erbil, the capital city of the Kurdistan region. Photographs of all aspects of IKMAA activities were displayed, such as explosive ordnance disposal, surveys, demining assets used in Kurdistan (manual, mechanical and mine-detecting dogs), cleared minefields in Kurdistan and the handing over of land to owners.

The role of mine-risk education in IKMAA was presented via a number of photographs which were taken as MRE

teams conducted and provided mine awareness to communities affected by landmines. MRE materials and publications were displayed. Additionally, the role of mine-victim assistance as one of the mine-action pillars was demonstrated through presenting prosthetic limbs and orthopedic devices to mine victims.

An outdoor demonstration of the demining process was also given. It highlighted the difficulty of the deminer's job.

The organization has handed over 39 cleared minefields (more than one million square meters [0.4 square mile]) to the landowners. There has been significant work toward reducing the impact of ERW in contaminated communities, clearing and returning them to their Kurdish owners and reviving the socio-economic infrastructure of the region. In 2006 IKMAA held four ceremonies to transfer the 39 cleared minefields. It is worth mentioning that the 39 minefields were cleared by local deminers from mine-affected communities. Direct beneficiaries of landowners signed the transfer-of-land documents and accepted the cleared lands during special ceremonies.

The MRE section at IKMAA has conducted three summer-school courses in mine/UXO-contaminated villages. The courses aim to: enhance the awareness of children and pupils regarding the danger of mines/UXO; teach children skills such as using a computer, painting, learning music, acting, protecting the environment, administering first aid and understanding children's rights while also using the summer holiday to provide information in the form of special classes, rather than spending time inside dangerous areas around the children's villages.

Conclusion

The Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency is proud of its accomplishments and is doing all that it can to make Kurdistan safe from-

landmines. IKMAA will continue to demine dangerous areas, educate people on the risks of mines and assist mine victims. Despite the many difficulties, IKMAA strives to inform the Kurdish people of the dangers of landmines and UXO. ♦

The IKMAA legislation was formally announced and approved by the parliament of the Kurdistan Regional Government on 7 May 2007. The legislation's 23 articles are in five sections that cover IKMAA Definitions, Establishment and Objectives, Structure and Responsibilities, Finance and Final Provisions.



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