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Afghanistan

by Kristen West and Rachel Canfield [Mine Action Information Center]



Graphic courtesy of MAIC

Afghanistan's landmine contamination began with the Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1989. Pro-Soviet Afghan-government forces continued contributing to this landmine, unexploded ordnance and other explosive remnants of war contamination during the next three years. Factional fighting from 1992 to 1995, resistance to the Taliban from 1996 to 2001 and the 2001 US-led invasion added to the problem. Not only does this contamination injure or kill more than 100 Afghans a month,¹ it also impacts the reconstruction and development of the country into an economically and politically stable nation.

The government of Afghanistan acceded to the Ottawa Convention² on September 11, 2002, and the Convention entered into force for the country on March 1, 2003. The government has promised to clear and destroy its landmines and other ERW³; however, it will take time for the remaining hundreds of thousands of landmines, pieces of UXO and other ERW to be removed.¹

The Problem

Landmines, UXO and other ERW affect 4.2 million Afghans in 2,368 communities in 32 of 34 provinces.¹ At the Ottawa Convention's First Review Conference in 2004, Afghanistan was recognized as one of the 24 States Parties with the greatest need for survivor assistance. According to Handicap International, there are 50,000 mine and UXO survivors in Afghanistan, and they account for 7 percent of the country's people with disabilities.⁴

Stockpiles of abandoned munitions represent one of the largest challenges for clearance in Afghanistan. Afghanistan contains stockpiles amounting to 100,000 British tons (112,000 U.S. tons) of ammunition, some of which are outside government control.⁴ Practical ownership of many of these stockpiles is unknown and the ammunition not collected or destroyed can be repurposed into improvised explosive devices (commonly called "roadside bombs") for use against government officials, aid workers and international troops.¹ Also, many stockpiles have not been maintained and are sometimes stored close to populated areas or in unguarded locations, which can lead to tragedy. For example, in May 2004, an ammunition cache stored in a house in the village of Bajgah exploded, leaving 70 people injured and 28 dead.⁴

Strategy

Afghanistan has pledged to enact national legislation to completely ban anti-personnel mines within four

years of the entry into force of the Ottawa Convention and destroy all stockpiles by 2007.⁵ The government is "committed to the vision of an Afghanistan free from ERW, where individuals and communities live in a safe environment conducive to national development and where landmine and ERW survivors are fully integrated in society and have their rights and needs recognized and fulfilled."¹

The government has endorsed several objectives to help it achieve an Afghanistan free from the effects of mines and other ERW, including coordination, capacity building, mine-risk education, mine survey, mine and UXO clearance, monitoring and evaluation, training, and victim assistance.¹ To reach its objectives, the government has developed five specific, measurable and time-bound goals for 2006–2009:

- **Demining.** All known contaminated areas will be demined and a clearing capacity will be maintained in case of emergency.
- **Mine/ERW-risk education.** A system will be created to teach the Afghan people to recognize and report mines and ERW.
- **Stockpile destruction.** All illegal, abandoned and unwanted munitions will be destroyed with the exception of those mines retained for training and development.
- **Mine/ERW survivor assistance.** Survivors will be reintegrated into society and supported by a national system.
- **Advocacy.** Officials and society will understand and support the importance of mine action and Afghanistan's obligations regarding mines and other ERW.¹

While there is no national mine authority in Afghanistan, the government plans to establish one that will help it reach its objectives.⁶ Currently, numerous U.N. organizations are involved in Afghanistan mine action. The United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan is responsible for planning, managing and overseeing all mine-action activities in the country.¹

The Mine Clearance Planning Agency is the only organization in Afghanistan responsible for all types of minefield and UXO surveillance. For the past 16 years, MCPA has worked in a very difficult security situation all over the country and, according to Director Haji Attiqullah, the organization is committed to continuing its work until the last mine is removed.⁷ Compared to four years ago, the security situation in Afghanistan is much worse, especially in the south, and has impeded demining efforts in parts of that region. In June 2006, an MCPA team was hijacked by the Taliban in the Panjwae district of the Kandahar province. Fortunately the team members were released, but Taliban members kept the vehicle.⁷ October 3, 2006, marked another attack in which opposition members triggered an explosive device near an MCPA team vehicle while in transit. Again, MCPA members were not harmed and the vehicle had minor damage.⁷ Attiqullah points out, though, that in the north and other regions, demining activities are going well without any major security problems.⁷

The Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan started its work in 1989 and consists of UNMACA, four U.N. Regional Mine Action Centres and local nongovernmental organizations.⁷ Among the activities MAPA conducts are contamination surveys, clearance, MRE and training.

In 2003, the United Nations Development Programme created the Afghanistan New Beginnings Program to help with the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process. Through this process, heavy and small arms were collected from former combatants, who were also trained to demine, conduct MRE and mark danger zones with the hope of reintegrating them into society and breaking ties with former commanders.⁸ By the conclusion of the process in June 2006, 25 percent of the 55,804 of the former combatants who chose one of the reintegration options had found long-term and sustainable activity.⁹ The ANBP is also active in other programs, such as Heavy Weapons Cantonment, the Anti-personnel Mine and Ammunition Stockpile Destruction Project and Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups.⁹

Outlook

As one of the most mine-affected countries in the world, Afghanistan still has a lot of work to be

completed. However, the country's outlook for clearing landmines, UXO and other ERW is good. The government has established a strong framework and clear strategy with the determination to meet its objectives by 2009.¹

Biography



Kristen West was an Editorial Assistant with the *Journal of Mine Action* for summer 2006. She graduated from James Madison University in May 2006 and is continuing her studies as a graduate student in JMU's Technical and Scientific Communication program. She hopes to pursue a career in medical writing.



Rachel Canfield has worked as an Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Mine Action* since January 2006. She is currently a junior at James Madison University working towards her Bachelor of Arts in public relations and print journalism.

Endnotes

1. "Afghanistan." *E-MINE: The Electronic Mine Information Network*. <http://www.mineaction.org/country.asp?c=1>. Accessed August 9, 2006. Last updated January 30, 2006
2. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*, Oslo, Norway. September 18, 1997. http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban_trty.htm. Accessed September 7, 2006. The document was opened for signature in Ottawa, Canada, December 3, 1997, and thus is commonly known as the Ottawa Convention.
3. **Editor's Note:** Some organizations consider mines and ERW to be two separate entities, since they are regulated by different legal documents (the former by the Ottawa Convention and Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the latter by CCW Protocol V). However, since mines are explosive devices that have similar effects to other ERW and it is often impossible to separate the two during clearance operations, some in the community have adopted a "working definition" (as opposed to a legal one) of ERW in which it is a blanket term that includes mines, UXO, abandoned explosive ordnance and other explosive devices.
4. "Anti-personnel Mine and Ammunition Stockpile Destruction." *ReliefWeb*. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/KHII-6SN3DJ?OpenDocument>. Accessed August 18, 2006.
5. According to *ReliefWeb*, "189,163 landmines and 10,071 tons of ammunition destroyed in Afghanistan." <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/KHII-6SN36R?OpenDocument>. Accessed August 15, 2006.
6. "Afghanistan." *2005 Landmine Monitor Report*. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2005/afghanistan.html>. Accessed August 9, 2006. Last updated November 10, 2005.
7. E-mail correspondence with Haji Attiqullah, Director of the Mine Clearance Planning Agency, October 2 and November 28, 2006.
8. "Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan (MAPA)." Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining Web site. http://www.gichd.org/758.0.html?tx_gichd_pi1organisation_id=362. Accessed September 8, 2006.
9. "Factsheet." *Afghanistan New Beginnings Program*. <http://www.undpanbp.org/Overview/factsheet.htm>. Accessed August 22, 2006.
10. "DDR: Reintegration has been Completed in Time and Within Costs." DDR Fact sheet. *Afghanistan New Beginnings Program*. Available online at <http://www.undpanbp.org/>. Accessed September 22, 2006.

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