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Guinea Bissau

by Jina Kim and Kristen West [Mine Action Information Center]



Graphic courtesy of MAIC

Past wars continue to haunt Guinea Bissau as remnants from previous conflicts are a constant reminder of what the country has undergone. Though the Liberation War lasted 11 years and finally ended in 1974, neighboring Senegal's internal conflict and Guinea Bissau's own civil war near the Casamance region would leave behind uglier scars.

The Liberation War resulted in many explosive remnants of war, but the subsequent civil war in Guinea Bissau from 1998 to 1999 is the main cause for the serious landmine problem in the country today. In addition to these two major battles, Guinea Bissau's neighbor, Senegal, has also contributed to the landmine problem. The border between the two countries is contaminated with mines and explosive remnants of war from Senegal's own Liberation War and the conflict in the Casamance region.

ERW¹ Problem

Guinea Bissau is a country struggling to improve its quality of life. In addition to mine-risk education and demining efforts, Guinea Bissau is struggling to improve its own internal political situation. UNICEF also has specific goals within Guinea Bissau—to reduce the infant mortality rate, to make quality schooling available, especially to girls, to ensure preparedness for emergencies and to further support other priorities outlined in the U.N. Millennium Development Goals.² Other nongovernmental organizations are trying to improve quality of life by educating citizens on disease (in particular HIV and AIDS), improving the health system, and rehabilitating and constructing wells.

The majority of ERW is located in the city of Bissau, where much of the fighting occurred during the civil war. The northern area of the country near the Senegal border is also heavily contaminated due to both Guinea Bissau's and Senegal's battles for independence. Guinea Bissau's internal conflict began with rebels' displeasure with the government and president at the time, João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira. Over a thousand Senegalese helped Guinea Bissau troops loyal to the government stop rebels from overthrowing the government. Furthermore, during Senegal's own civil war, which began in 1990 and continued throughout the early part of the decade, the Senegalese army attacked Casamance and Guinea Bissau because of Guinea Bissau's alleged protection of the rebel group the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance.

The contaminated areas in Guinea Bissau coincide with the areas where the most government revenue and citizen income are produced. The reason why the most productive areas of the country are targeted with mines is a strategic one: to cripple the country as much as possible. Market crops such as rice, cashew nuts and fish are all located in sections suspected to be heavily contaminated with ERW. These areas suffer the most because not only do mines and other ERW limit current productivity, but demining

activities here are often considered too risky because explosive remnants of war tend to be more unpredictable than landmines. This complication further hinders future productivity.

Civilian Implications

Vestiges of the wars affect the populace in more than just economic ways. According to the *Centro Nacional de Coordenação da Acção Anti-Minas (CAAMI)*, as of May 30, 2005, 667 casualties occurred due to mines and unexploded ordnance. Of these casualties at least 104 were children, and the vast majority of these—505—were caused by unexploded ordnance.

The Simão Mendes Hospital is the primary hospital for treating UXO patients. There are only nine hospitals in Guinea Bissau that have emergency ambulances, and only one functioning rehabilitation center. Though there are several hospitals, they are not as equipped as the Simão Mendes Hospital—they have limited equipment and lack of qualified doctors. Many times patients who have been injured by landmines or other ERW cannot afford hospitalization.

Aiding victims of landmines and ERW has proven difficult. Guinea Bissau still faces a plethora of problems such as poverty, political conflicts, a huge national deficit and a general lack of organization. Guinea Bissau is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world.³ Outside countries are hesitant to honor monetary pledges because of the instability within the government. The military is highly immersed with the government, so much so that the Representative to the U.N. Secretary-General and the Head of the United Nations Peace-Building Support Office in Guinea Bissau, Samuel C. Nana-Sinkam, calls it a "parallel government."⁴ Present leaders of the struggling country have little experience being in a political position, causing further difficulties.

Mine-risk Education

CAAMI has developed an MRE program in Guinea Bissau. However, the past two years have been a struggle. Lack of funding resulted in lack of workers because the payment system was inefficient. Volunteers still worked on the MRE program, but CAAMI could only afford to pay 100 workers for two months in 2004.

CAAMI has also incorporated MRE into the primary school curriculum, as well as implemented door-to-door campaigning, local involvement and radio broadcasts. There are several hundred MRE workers around the country.

Mine Action and Clearance

August 16, 2006, marked a momentous occasion in Guinea Bissau. The city of Bissau, with the exception of the area surrounding the Brá airport, was finally declared "mine free."⁵ Two nongovernmental organizations, Humanitarian Aid and Let's Fight Against Mines, organized the demining operations in the city. They covered 937,000 meters (582 miles) of ground and removed 2,580 anti-personnel mines, 73 anti-tank mines, and 70,755 pieces of UXO and other ERW.

As for the rest of the country, mine-action workers are still demining. In accordance with the Ottawa Convention, Guinea Bissau must destroy all AP mines no later than November 1, 2011. In addition to CAAMI, organizations such as HUMAID, *Lutamos Todos Contra as Minas* and Handicap International have contributed to the demining effort in Guinea Bissau.

Conclusion

Victim assistance, more focus on ERW—especially UXO—and maintaining outside donation pledges are the primary demining concerns for Guinea Bissau today. With the success in clearing Bissau, there is much hope for citizens, as it was the most contaminated area. With respect to Guinea Bissau's 2011 deadline for becoming mine free, the country is hopeful and confident it will reach its goal two years ahead of the Ottawa Convention's timetable.⁶

Biography



Jina Kim has worked for the Mine Action Information Center since January 2006. She is a senior at James Madison University pursuing her Bachelor of Arts in technical and scientific communication. Kim will graduate in May 2007 and plans to pursue a career in the nonprofit sector.



Kristen West was an editorial assistant with the *Journal of Mine Action* during summer 2006. She graduated from James Madison University in May 2006 and is continuing her studies there as a graduate student in technical and scientific communication. She hopes to pursue a career in medical writing.

Endnotes

1. **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.
2. The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015—form a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and the entire world's leading development institutions, trying to meet the needs of the world's poorest.
3. "Guinea Bissau." *CIA—The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/pu.html>. Updated August 22, 2006. Accessed November 27, 2006.
4. "Guinea Bissau." United Nations Web site. http://www.un.org/Depts/dpa/docs/conflict/guinea_bissau.html. Accessed November 27, 2006.
5. **Editor's Note:** Some countries and mine-action organizations are urging the use of the term "mine free," while others are espousing the term "mine safe" or "impact free." "Mine free" connotes a condition where all landmines have been cleared, whereas the terms "mine safe" and "impact free" refer to the condition in which landmines no longer pose a credible threat to a community or country.
6. "Guinea Bissau: Stockpiles gone but landmines a continued threat." IRIN <http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=49779>. Accessed November 27, 2006.

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1. "Guinea Bissau." *E-MINE: The Electronic Mine Information Network*. <http://www.mineaction.org/country.asp?c=13>. Updated December 29, 2005. Accessed August 17, 2006.
2. "Guinea Bissau." *Landmine Monitor Report 2005*. International Campaign to Ban Landmines. http://www.icbl.org/lm/2005/guinea_bissau.html. Accessed August 17, 2006.
3. "Guinea Bissau: Capital Declared Safe From Mines." *AllAfrica.com*. Originally published by U.N. *Integrated Regional Information Networks*. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200608160676.html>. Accessed August 31, 2006.

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