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Iraq

by Rachel Canfield [Mine Action Information Center]



Graphic courtesy of MAIC

Decades of internal conflict, a history overtaken with war and a delicate new government put Iraq in the midst of an explosive-remnants-of-war situation that is worsening as the security situation continues to deteriorate. The country's unstable nature poses a challenge for organizations that wish to provide much-needed humanitarian assistance. Conflicts between ethnic and political parties, the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the more recent U.S.-led invasion in 2003 left the country's 169,234 square miles (438,314 square meters) riddled with landmines, unexploded ordnance and abandoned explosive ordnance.¹

Before the new government began its term in May 2006, Iraq as a transitional entity was not able to accede to international treaties; therefore, Iraq is not yet a party to the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention² or the Convention on Conventional Weapons.³ Iraqi officials have studied the Mine Ban Convention and the Iraqi Cabinet decided in August 2006 to accede to the AP Mine Ban Convention.

Contamination

The National Mine Action Authority estimates there are 3,089 square miles (8,000 square meters) of contaminated land. As of April 2006, the Iraq Landmine Impact Survey had identified more than 4,000 areas that are possibly contaminated with explosive remnants of war.⁴ A variety of ERW threaten the Iraqi people—abandoned explosive ordnance, landmines/UXO and small arms/light weapons.

AXO. Once conflicts have ended, unused explosive ordnance discarded by those involved in the fighting becomes what is known as *abandoned explosive ordnance*. AXO poses a threat because of its ability to be used in the making of improvised explosive devices. A large amount of AXO was taken during post-war looting and numerous weapons caches containing explosive ordnance have not been secured. IEDs have been made and used by insurgents in attacks against Iraqi troops, Coalition forces and Iraqi civilians.

Landmines and UXO. The worst mine/UXO contamination is in the most heavily populated parts of the north-central, central and southern regions. In the southern areas, 90 percent of mined land prevents access to potential agricultural resources.⁵ The cause of the landmine and UXO threat arises from the armed conflicts throughout the past 40 years. During the current conflict, Coalition and Iraqi government military forces have not been party to any new reported mine-laying.⁶ However, opposition forces have laid anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines.⁶ While Iraq is no longer a producer of landmines, mines are still found in weapons caches across the country. In 2004, U.S. forces found 800 mines in caches in the

city of Fallujah.

While Coalition forces have not been involved in new mine-laying, they have contributed to UXO contamination all over the country. Estimates show that the U.S. military alone has dropped 10,782 cluster bombs containing 1.8 million submunitions.⁷

Small arms/light weapons. Since Saddam Hussein was removed from power in 2003, Iraqi civilians have obtained an estimated seven to eight million small arms, according to the 2004 edition of the *Small Arms Survey*.⁸ Small arms kill and injure more people than any other conventional weapon, and there are no globally accepted standards to regulate responsible arms trade.⁹ With Iraq holding the world's estimated fourth-largest supply of conventional arms,⁸ protecting civilians' daily lives is a challenging task. The U.S. conducted an eight-day gun buyback program in Iraq in May 2004. Over the course of the program US\$350,000 was given in exchange for weapons, ranging from ammunition to AK-47s to surface-to-air missiles.⁹

Involved Organizations

U.N.-supported mine action in Iraq is led by the United Nations Development Programme. Before the 2003 conflict, mine action in Iraq was focused primarily in the northern governorates through the United Nations Oil for Food Programme's efforts. This program is continuing independently from the central government. A National Mine Action Authority was created by the Coalition Provisional Authority in August 2003. Responsibilities of the NMAA include strategic planning and budgeting, project coordination, donor relations, setting national mine-action standards and maintaining the national mine-action database.

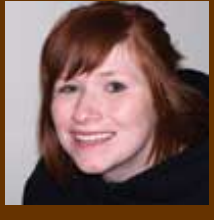
For Iraqi mine action, the UNDP is focusing on institutional development of the NMAA and support to national operational capacity development through the creation of nongovernmental organizations.⁷ The UNDP is making progress on the challenges that have arisen, mainly the need to restructure the NMAA and the limited financial resources. "We have started with a process to restructure the NMAA with the new government and hopefully, when the donor community sees a better functioning institution, they would also provide us with more financial support," Salomon Schreuder of the UNDP states.¹⁰

Conclusion

The UNDP envisions an "Iraq free of the threat of landmines and ERW, where individuals and communities live in a safe environment conducive to development and where the needs of mine and ERW victims are met and they are fully integrated into their societies."¹⁰ The NMAA's Strategic Plan for Mine Action—adopted in 2004 and known as "Vision 2020"—aims to achieve impact-free status by 2020 through mine-risk education, landmine/UXO clearance and survivor assistance. In looking just at 2004, we find that 13,321 anti-personnel mines, 8,806 anti-vehicle mines and 1,170,478 pieces of UXO were destroyed. With conflicts endangering civilians every day, meeting NMAA's impact-free goal will be difficult, but the mine-action programs are optimistically working towards that end.

Biography

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 toward her Bachelor of Arts in public relations and print journalism.



Endnotes

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