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The Rise of ERW as a Threat to Civilians



The methods used in warfare have changed over the years, causing more threats to civilians, such as these people killed in Darfur in 2005.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LT. COLONEL MOHAMED TAGHIULLAH OULD NEMA

In this article, the author looks at the rise of landmines and ERW¹ as military tactics from the First World War to current conflicts. The safety risk their presence poses and various measures to protect civilians are also discussed.

by Lt. Colonel Mohamed Taghioullah Ould Nema [Mauritania National Demining Office]

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the world has witnessed several destructive and deadly wars. Two of the most horrific were the First and Second World Wars, during which explosives, engines, rockets and shells were used widely. Many people died and large amounts of property were destroyed. Of great concern is that a significant number of people continue to be at risk due to the existence of thousands of explosive remnants of war, including landmines, resulting from these and other conflicts.

To some degree, landmines are losing their importance in the face of the new trends in military tactics, as can be observed in the recent massive military campaigns in Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Lebanon, for example. These conflicts have essentially been led as air strikes rather than ground attacks. This change in tactics produces a complicated situation in which children and other innocent civilians increasingly have to deal with a large quantity of unexploded debris (missiles, shells, rockets, bombs, engines) right in their own communities and homes. This new environment of the battlefield contributes to worsening significantly the living situation for civilians—buildings and bridges are destroyed; many fires spread due to the presence of incendiary ammunition and explosions or flames; broken iron and glass litter communities; people suffer a loss of electricity due to the destruction of electric power stations; etc.

Consequently, civilian protection during a conflict nowadays should be the most important activity in the mine-action process. Otherwise, the most vulnerable civilians may be severely injured or killed simply because they find themselves near military targets during air strikes, and later because of the potentially huge and unfortunate ERW risks that will be difficult to overcome following the conflict.

The two World Wars gave landmines an important tactical role. The combination of tank and air strikes was a crucial strategic principle for success during these wars. At the same time, in order to protect one's own position from the infantry's attack or an armoured assault, the strategy was often to use landmines and create minefields. Mines were used as an efficient way to harass the enemy, defend one's own location, cover one's troops from attackers and reinforce one's military equipment. They were an important component of the tactical manoeuvre used that included artillery strikes, aircraft hits, and armoured and infantry actions.

As time went on, the effectiveness of tanks and new weapons lessened the need for minefields as a solution against armoured attacks. For instance, during World War II the Italian, British and German forces all laid mountains of landmines in northern Africa, but the mines weren't as effective as in the past because the tanks used by the military could roll right over them without being affected. Because so many mines were emplaced, huge quantities of landmines and ERW remain today.

Increased Use of Missiles and Ordnance in the Gulf Wars

On 15 January 1991, U.N. Coalition Forces started air raids on Iraq, but the ground attack did not begin until 24 February. This situation reflects how the previously important role of the tank in warfare has lessened and how mines as well have lost some of their value as a weapon in armed conflict. With battle tactics shifting to the air with such warplanes as the F-117² and B-52³ and other aerial vectors that drop immense quantities of bombs and rockets on the enemy, the battleground has changed. Increasingly sophisticated weaponry, such as the Patriot missile,⁴ and other means of aerial attack and defence were used in the first Gulf War and since to gain a strategic advantage. The resulting destruction from these tactics is systematic, leading to massive collateral damage on the ground.

The tactics of modern warfare have continued to involve more ERW than mines, as seen in the March 2003 invasion of Baghdad, Iraq, during which Coalition Forces dropped munitions from the air in large quantities. As a result, the incidence of ERW has grown significantly, while the use of landmines is decreasing. In addition, Iraq has seen a large increase in the use of improvised bombs, missiles and other explosive devices by non-state actors, leading again to an increased threat of harm from ERW.

As a result, ERW—instead of mines—are now the biggest threat to civilians; indeed, this shift in warfare highlights the need for a new approach to mine action in order to deal with the very real consequences of ERW for civilians in the aftermath of war.

Case in Point: Recent Conflict in Lebanon

The 34-day conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon that ended 14 August 2006, involved a deployment of explosive weapons

by both sides across the border along with an Israeli ground invasion into Lebanon. In particular, Israel dropped or fired over a million submunitions from cluster munitions into Lebanese land.⁵

The destruction was systematic, leading to an environment at the end of the war that is not only very unkind but also continues to be critically dangerous to civilians due to the massive quantity of bombs, bomblets, shells and rockets that remain everywhere in southern Lebanon.

To the outside world, it seems during Israel's air strikes there was little difference established between the military objectives and civilian targets. Bridges, roads and airports were destroyed to strategically cripple enemy forces; yet this also made the delivery of humanitarian aid not only hard but nearly impossible.

Suggestions for Protecting Civilians

Many measures can be taken to ensure the safety of civilians, particularly with the

increased threats they face in modern warfare. In the Middle East and other regions at risk of conflict, it is important to protect civilians by providing the poorest countries with bunkers and other protective installations in the main cities during peaceful periods, with a particular focus on schools and hospitals.

Additionally, international law should strictly enforce the convention against killing civilians and destroying civilian areas during conflict, prosecuting under criminal law those who do not follow this convention. The United Nations Security Council should also be given the power—and be willing to use it—to stop any war in which genocide is observed.

Finally, in mine action, activities need to focus on providing updated awareness campaigns that are informed by the changing reality of recent conflicts to ensure that children and other vulnerable people are protected. ♦

See Endnotes, page 109



Lt. Colonel Mohamed Ould Nema is a graduate of the Mohamed V University in Rabat, Morocco. He has participated in several additional training programs, including courses in France, Egypt, Algeria, and Syria, and the U.N. Senior Managers Course presented by the Mine Action Information Center at James Madison University. He is currently Head of the Mauritania National Demining Office.

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