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Mauritania

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By: **Jina Kim [Mine Action Information Center]**

Mauritania is located in northwest Africa. Poverty defines this country, ranking 149th of 174 countries on the human development index, where 40 percent of the children are malnourished and 60 percent of adults in Mauritania are illiterate.¹ Much of the citizens' income and government's revenue come from the cities of Tiris Zemmour and Dakhlet Nouadhibou, which coincide with the location of a majority of mines.

The mine problem is a result of the Saharan War in 1974 in which Mauritians, Moroccans and Saharan rebels battled over the Spanish Sahara. Spain no longer governed the Saharan land and relinquished its claim to Morocco and Mauritania. However, native Saharans formed a rebel guerrilla group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of *Saguia el Hamra* and *Rio de Oro*, otherwise known as the *Polisario*. The rebels opposed annexation to Morocco, and their goal was to become an independent entity. The Polisario was supported by Libya and Algeria. Both sides in the conflict randomly emplaced mines over 14,000 square miles² of land in Mauritania alone. In 1978, a peace treaty was signed, but the war left behind a lethal legacy.² Mauritania signed the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention December 3, 1997, and ratified the Convention July 21, 2000.³ Mauritania has stated its ultimate goal is to be free from the impact of mines by the year 2011.³



(click on thumbnail to see larger image in new window)

Demining Challenges

Demining Mauritania is a daunting task due to its large area; the country covers approximately

397,955 square miles and it has never been properly mapped. Sporadic layout of mines due to the war contributes to difficulties in demining.³ Leftover mines and pieces of UXO from the colonial period are scattered across other parts of the country as well.⁴ The two predominant types of mines found in Mauritania are French APID 51 anti-personnel mines⁵ and ACID 51 anti-tank mines.⁶

The shifting of dunes, instability of soils and absence of natural barriers present huge obstacles to clearance operations and increase the dangers for the civilian population. In addition, it is difficult to demine Nouadhibou and Tiris because of the chaotic manner in which Morocco, Mauritania, the *Polisario*, Libya and Algeria dispersed their mines during the Saharan War.

Civilian Implications

According to Mohamed Ould Nema, Chief of Planning and Training for the Mauritanian Army, "Many schools were also closed, and about [30,000 Mauritians] abandoned their neighborhoods due to mine threats."² From the beginning of the Saharan War until 2003, 345 people were killed and 246 people injured. At least 580 animals were also killed, which is a serious blow to the economic revenue of Mauritania, as cattle are a key resource. These numbers are only reported cases—many deaths and injuries caused by mines are not reported because of the nomadic lifestyle of some Mauritians and ineffective administrative control.

In 2003, one person was killed and three people were injured. In 2004, three people were killed and two were injured. Just last year, in January 2005, two children were killed in the town of Zouerratt. In September 2005 two tourists were injured from mines, which hindered tourism as a new means of revenue Mauritania was exploring.³ In 2003, the discovery of oil seemed to be a stroke of luck for Mauritania, but the staff of a British geological company, who were supposed to aid in oil drilling, refused because the oil field was commingled with minefields.³

Mine Action

Since 2002, a reported 141,000 square meters (approximately 35 acres) of mined area were cleared. And though 27 minefields have been identified, they are poorly marked. Although these numbers seem encouraging, there is still much to be done. Demining efforts in Mauritania are now focused on clearly marking and identifying mines in the identified minefields. As of April 2005, Mauritania had "destroyed 397 anti-personnel mines, 72 anti-vehicle mines and 170 [pieces of] UXO in mine-affected areas."³

Mauritania has joined forces with UNICEF in order to conduct further demining efforts through education. Through UNICEF, the country has implemented a mine-risk education program. The MRE program was developed in August 2004 and "seeks to reduce mine incidents in the north through MRE in all villages and nomad camps within affected areas, and to encourage the creation of community support networks."³ The program's focus has also been to incorporate mine risk knowledge into schools' curriculums, supply training and communication materials, and mark mine-infested areas with signs.

Mauritania has developed its own mine action centers—the National Bureau for Humanitarian Demining and the U.N. Mine Action Service Mine Action Portfolio country team. The National Bureau for Humanitarian Demining was founded in order to coordinate and assign demining tasks for the country. Another office of the NBHD was also created in order to support the main NBHD

office. This second office has no specific goals but has accomplished much in the past few years, such as mine clearance, awareness campaigns, victim assistance, and destruction of mines.² The Portfolio team's mission is to join forces with the National Bureau for Humanitarian Demining and execute their same goals.

Conclusion

The mine problem in Mauritania is impeding many economic resources. However, efforts to raise awareness on demining have greatly increased since Mauritania signed the Mine Ban Convention. Along with presenting MRE programs, destroying remaining mines, and involving citizens in demining programs, Mauritania will be able to vastly improve its economic status by eradicating the threat of mines in the two main cities, Tiris Zemmour and Dakhlet Nouadhibou, and oil locales.

Biography

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



Endnotes

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2. Nema, Mohamed Ould. Fact Sheet: "Mine Action in Mauritania," Jan. 26, 2006.
3. "Mauritania." *Landmine Monitor Report 2005*. International Campaign to Ban Landmines. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2005/mauritania.html>. Accessed Jan. 24, 2006.
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5. Sometimes known as M-51, this is a small, plastic, circular-shaped mine that comes in two types: no metal-content and minimal content.
6. This is an anti-tank and lightweight landmine. Originally from France and made from pressed sheet metal, this landmine weighs approximately 11 pounds. Its explosive type is picric acid and is marked with black markings painted on top of charge box between fuse wells.

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