August 2006

Mine Action in Mauritania

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Impact of Mines and UXO

About 20% of the previously nomadic population has become urbanized, a consequence of which is urban expansion into the areas of defensive mine belts. Many of these nomads still follow pastoral practices, which has resulted in mine accidents involving people and valuable livestock, particularly camels. Northern Mauritania is known as the last place to raise camels, so it attracts all the nomadic populations in the region. Finding landmines does not make people in these areas want to move, because they have heard stories that other regions are likely to bring sickness to their camels, resulting in poverty. The key economic activities of metal ore extraction and fishing are also affected by the presence of mines.

Mauritania is developing as a tourist destination and has seen a revitalisation in the northern parts of the country in the regions of Dakhlet Nounaouhata, Adrar and Tiris Zemmour, mostly around urban centres and key economic centres. Mines and explosive remnants of war are found in the northern part of the country in the regions of Dakhlet Nounaouhata, Adrar and Tiris Zemmour, mostly around the urban centres of Nounaouhata, Zoueratt and Bouargane. Mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) have been found close to the towns of Choum, F. Debric, Bouassale and at more remote locations all along the northern and western borders.

A variety of mine types are present in Mauritania, although the most common are the French APID 51 (anti-personnel) and ACID 51 (anti-tank). The mine situation has a direct impact on the health of the nomadic people, known for their freedom of mobility, moving daily, following their camels in the desert.

To implement a real programme for humanitarian demining, the Mauritanian government created two mine-action entities in 2000 following the implementation of the Ottawa Convention: the Bureau National de Déminage Humanitaire and the National Committee in charge of implementing the Ottawa Convention.

The BNDDH, a dedicated entity within the Mauritanian military engineers, is responsible for all mine-action-related activities in the country. This national agency is the only demining capacity in the country, conducting both mine/UXO clearance and mine-awareness activities with partners.

The National Committee includes ministries involved in the mine-action issues—Defence, Foreign Affairs, Interior and Justice, Parliament and nongovernmental organizations. This committee is responsible for establishing the work plan for the National Demining Office, including national priorities, and giving an annual report on the implemented tasks to the BNDDH and national government.

Achievements to Date

Since the end of war in 1978, the military engineers have been responsible for clearing mines in Mauritania. Between 1978 and 1999 these outputs resulted in the destruction of approximately 7,000 mines and 5,000 pieces of UXO. This clearance was conducted with limited technical resources and utilizing military techniques.

In 1999, the military adopted standard operating procedures for humanitarian mine clearance. These standards have improved the safety and efficiency of the clearance itself, but rigid adherence to foreign standards has drastically reduced the clearance results.

After ratifying the Ottawa Convention, the BNDDH approached many donors in order to raise funds for implementing all the mine/UXO clearance. These standard operating procedures for humanitarian mine clearance have clear standards to follow.

That project is the most important activity carried out in the last two years by the mine-action programmes.

The results that have been achieved since the introduction of the 1998 International Mine Action Standards are listed in Table 1.

Mauritanian mine/UXO clearance

Mauritian National Capacity

• 120 deminers (190 by mid-2006)
• 12 demining instructors
• 6 mine-awareness instructors
• Specific equipment for clearance (detectors, vehicles, etc.)
• With support of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, the BNDDH has installed the Information Management System for Mine Action databases

Conclusion

Mauritania can be free of landmines in a short time with a little support from the UNDP and the international community. With this much-needed support, it should be possible for Mauritania to meet its completion initiative by January 11.

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Published by BMJ Scholarly Commons, 2004

10.1 | August | 2006 | journal of mine action | Focus | 25

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