

Ethiopian Mine Action Office: Tackling Landmine Problems in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's landmine/unexploded ordnance problem is largely due to past wars and conflicts.

The Ethiopian Mine Action Office was created in an attempt to alleviate the situation. This article discusses the country's history and the efforts made to make it safe.

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Ethiopia has suffered from a landmine/unexploded ordnance problem for more than seven decades due to the following succession of conflicts, wars and disputes:

- The Italian invasion in 1935
- The Ethiopia and Somalia conflict, 1977–1978
- The dispute with Sudan in 1980
- The Ethiopian Civil War, 1975–1991
- The recent conflict with Eritrea, 1998–2000

Though the Ethiopian Landmine Impact Survey results need further verification, the preliminary findings of the survey indicate that 2,443 square kilometres (943 square miles) of land contain mines. Over 1.9 million people in Ethiopia live in landmine-impacted communities, and the survey identified 1,492 communities as impacted by landmines and UXO. Three regions in particular are contaminated: Tigray, Afar and Somali.

To address this problem, EMAO was established by the Ethiopian government through the Council of Ministers Regulation No. 70/2001, under the Office of the Prime Minister. EMAO acts as the government's focal point for management of mine-action operations and related activities. It is responsible for planning, prioritization, accreditation, monitoring, resource mobilization, acquisition of the mine-information database and other mine-action activities that support the nation's development program. EMAO is working to apply the International Mine Action Standards to the Ethiopian context. It seeks to reduce the threat to the returning populations in the target areas by removing and/or marking mines to international humanitarian standards and by raising the capacity as well as the productivity of demining. EMAO gives first priority for clearance of areas in close proximity to dwellings, second to land used for agriculture and third to any

land used for grazing. As a result of EMAO's humanitarian-demining operations, which began in May 2002, more than 20.28 million square metres (about 8 square miles) of land infested with mines has already been cleared. About 1,291 anti-personnel mines, 209 anti-tank mines and 20,410 pieces of UXO have been found and destroyed, with an immense number of fragments collected and eliminated.

In the coming years, EMAO plans to increase its output considerably. This, of course, can be accomplished through proper utilization of its experience and by employing additional demining assets including machines.

In light of these facts, and if the ELIS data is more or less considered to fall around 2,443 square kilometres (943 square miles), then the impacted communities and mine-infested lands would take a number of years to tackle. Therefore, the EMAO would like to employ further accident-prevention methods including using demining flail machines and taking various technical measures, and it is seeking additional funding to do so. The Ottawa Convention,¹ which Ethiopia ratified in the fall of 2004, obliges the country to remove and destroy its emplaced anti-personnel mines within 10 years.

At present, the six manual demining companies, the mechanical demining machines and the dog teams are deployed on the boundaries of the three affected regions of Ethiopia. These prioritized areas are all found in the country's three heavily mine-affected regions. Each company is comprised of three 18-member platoons (one Technical Survey and two clearance platoons). Additionally, each company is assigned a Quality-assurance Officer.² Mine-risk education and community-liaison activity around the demining area are also core activities run by EMAO's skilled professionals. The EMAO MRE program was established in March 2002 and

is provided by many village-level task forces. Community-liaison Officers are found in Gulomekeda, Ahferom, Tahtay Adiabo, Merebleke, Kafta Humera (Tigray) and Elidaar (Afar).²

EMAO plans to acquire more mechanical-demining machines and expand the mine-detection dog program to be deployed in the next mine-clearance activities, which will be integrated with its existing integrated mine-clearance forces. ♦

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