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Egypt

by Daniele Ressler
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Egypt is one of the most heavily mined nations in the world, with estimates ranging from 16.7 to 22 million landmines/pieces of unexploded ordnance,¹ or an estimated one-tenth of the world's 200 million landmines.² Seventeen million landmines and pieces of UXO³ are estimated to be located in the Western Desert, a result of intense fighting during World War II between Allied and Axis forces at the El-Alamein perimeter. Approximately five million³ additional landmines were spread across the Sinai Peninsula and Red Sea coasts, largely from the Arabian-Israeli conflicts of 1956, 1957 and 1973. The Egyptian military estimates 19.7 million mines and pieces of UXO still exist, after nearly three million mines/pieces of UXO were cleared between 1983 and 1999, mostly in the Sinai.⁴

Casualties/Incidence

The Egyptian government has regarded landmine/UXO contamination as a sensitive issue and limits information on the extent of the problem. Mines/UXO are distributed over approximately 287,000 hectares (1,108 square miles) with civilians reportedly using mine-affected areas for cultivation, grazing, infrastructure projects and housing.⁵ There is no national data-collection mechanism, so many mine incidents likely go unreported, particularly in the Western Desert area among nomadic Bedouin tribes. The 2005 *Landmine Monitor Report* states casualties have occurred on a regular basis in Egypt. Between 1999 and 2002, there were at least 70 mine/UXO casualties, and in 2004, at least 10 civilians were injured, including five children. No casualty total is known, but some officials estimate the number at over 8,000.⁵

Survivor assistance varies for civilian and military casualties. While there are military hospitals and rehabilitation facilities, emergency services remain inadequate for civilians. Additionally, in 2005 there were no known nongovernmental or international organizations with special programs for mine survivors.⁵

Challenges in Egypt

Egypt faces specific technical challenges to demining efforts due to geology and the aging of weapons. In the Suez Canal

and coastal areas, swamps make demining work difficult, and in the Western Desert, sand dunes and wind move and conceal landmines/UXO.⁶ The aging of UXO items makes them increasingly unsteady and prone to detonation. It is estimated that of Egypt's approximately 19.7 million abandoned munitions, only 25 percent are actual landmines while the remaining 75 percent are pieces of UXO.⁴ Furthermore, there are few records of minefields, and many mines are low-metal mines, a fact that inhibits detection.⁴

Another challenge is the lack of national and international commitment to and funding for mine action/demining in Egypt. Though Egypt has stated it supports a ban on anti-personnel mines for humanitarian reasons, it has not acceded to the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention⁷ due to concerns regarding security and general principle.⁸ The government claims a right to self-defense, saying landmines are necessary to protect its expansive borders. Egypt also argues that the Ottawa Convention does not require countries responsible for laying mines to remove them or provide assistance in mine clearance. Presently, cleanup is estimated at US\$250 million. Due to Egypt's use of landmines and refusal to sign the Convention, international funding to the country has been limited. Nearly all mine-clearance operations have occurred through the Egyptian Army, with a few commercially funded projects and no reported humanitarian clearance operations.⁵

Progress

Progress is being made, however. Until recently, Egypt was listed as a producer of landmines, but in December 2004, the Egyptian government announced a moratorium on the exportation and production of anti-personnel mines. Since 2002, Egypt has taken a development-focused approach to its mine problem with the National Committee to Develop the Northwest Coast and Mine Clearance by working on an ambitious 20-year strategy to develop Egypt's north coast to attract tourists. This includes removal of landmines, which block development efforts in 22 percent of the area.⁹

Although national mine action has been slow, the increase in population and limited non-desert residential areas mean Egypt is feeling the pinch of growth; in light of this fact, demining will likely be an increasingly high priority for the government. Landmines/UXO also stand in the way of land needed for agriculture and water, blocking three million feddans¹⁰ of cultivable land and 300 million cubic meters (392 million cubic yards) of underground water.⁹

As Egypt is a quickly developing and growing country, land will become increasingly important.

Facing the Future

Egypt faces competing issues of security, which may determine future progress made in demining. A major demining effort is needed for economic growth and national development within the country, yet Egypt's refusal to sign the Ottawa Convention⁷ may prevent the country from adequately addressing these key questions: Who pays for and is responsible for Egypt's costly, arduous demining? Can Egypt actively join the movement and stop laying landmines for security when there is still political and military instability in the Middle East?

The two-day International Conference for Development and Landmine Clearance in late December 2005, organized by the National Council for Human Rights, highlighted the gravity of Egypt's landmine problem to the world. It ended with participants urging two things: that Egypt reconsider its position on international conventions concerning landmines and that the international community offer Egypt funding and technical support even if Egypt is not a State Party to the Mine Ban Convention. ♦

To view endnotes and references for this article, visit <http://maic.jmu.edu/journal/10.1/profiles/egypt/egypt.htm/#endnotes>.



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