

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 10
Issue 1 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 16

August 2006

Eritrea

Country Profile

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Recommended Citation

Profile, Country (2006) "Eritrea," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol10/iss1/16>

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Eritrea

by Megan Wertz

[Mine Action Information Center]

Eritrea's landmine and unexploded ordnance contamination problem began during World War II when British and Italian forces fought on Eritrean soil. A long struggle for independence (1962–1991) and a border war with Ethiopia (1998–2000) followed, exacerbating the problem. Eritrea has never produced or exported anti-personnel mines; all mines used in the past were stolen from Ethiopian forces from minefields or storage facilities during the War of Independence. There are no mine stockpiles except for 214 mines retained by the Eritrean Demining Authority National Training Center for training and development. Eritrea acceded to the Ottawa Convention¹ Aug. 27, 2001, and it entered into force Feb. 1, 2002.

Extent of Contamination

The Landmine Impact Survey, completed in June 2004, found 481 of 4,176 communities in 143 of 153 districts contaminated with

33 communities considered high impact, 100 medium impact and 348 low impact. According to the LIS, there are 914 suspected mined areas and 113 UXO-contaminated sites. Though the problem is nationwide, the Shilalo area (Gash Barka region in the southwest) is the most mine-affected area.

The mine- and UXO-contaminated areas affect over 655,000 people in Eritrea. The hardest hit members of the population are rural inhabitants, nomadic people, landmine survivors, internally displaced persons and refugees. Refugees and IDPs are often prevented from returning home due to the threat of mines in IDP- and refugee-camp areas and in their home communities.

Humanitarian Challenge

Food security is unstable because much of the agricultural land is contaminated with mines. The problem has also impeded building social-support systems for the most vulnerable population groups and creating linkages with recovery, reconstruction and development. The scattered nature of the mines and UXO, combined with changes in weather patterns and seasonal activities, puts the civilian population at particular risk. During the harvest season (April–May) or periods of drought and dramatic crop failure, civilians often migrate far from local areas seeking food and water into areas that may have unmarked mine fields. Due to the

mine-contaminated areas, the country is unable to expand its road and transportation network, other infrastructure projects and the tourism industry.

Government Mine Action

In 2000, the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and the Eritrea Mine Action Coordination Center was established. The Center increased humanitarian mine-action efforts, including support from international nongovernmental organizations and U.N. agencies. In March 2002, the United Nations Development Programme initiated the Mine Action Capacity Building Program. The MACBP was designed to assist the Eritrean Demining Authority and Eritrean Demining Operations in building their capacity and implementing programs including mine clearance, victim assistance and mine-risk education.

The MACBP was later revised and updated to take into account changes in the mine-action sector resulting from Proclamation 123/2002 issued by the government of Eritrea. The proclamation officially established the EDA and EDO in July 2002.

The EDA is the national authority responsible for policy regulation of the mine-action sector. EDO is the national institute engaged in the operational aspects of mine action. Under Proclamation 123/2002, UNICEF assisted the EDA and EDO in

development and implementation of the national mine-risk education program. In April 2005, the MACBP and UNICEF suspended all support to EDA and EDO operations because government authorities impounded all EDA and EDO mine-action vehicles due to a pending fuel crisis.² Future U.N. support will depend greatly on whether these vehicles are released.

According to Eritrea's National Plan, from 2005 to 2009 mine-action activities will seek to fulfill four strategic objectives:

- 1. Return of displaced persons.** Expand resources to complete Technical Survey and task-assessment planning, clearance, marking, and integrated mine-risk education and victim assistance to permit the return of IDPs, returnees and refugees.³
- 2. High- and medium-impact communities.** Clear high- and medium-impact communities, and integrate MRE and VA.
- 3. Low-impact communities.** Conduct MRE activities to reduce new casualties and assist clearance of UXO in 344 low-impact communities.
- 4. Victim support.** Establish a victim-support system that will provide effective assistance to victims.

RONCO Consulting Corporation, funded by the U.S. State Department, established

the Eritrean mine-detection dog capability, and in 2006 EDO will have 18 MDDs supported by manual clearance teams. RONCO trained two demining companies to operate the latest demining technology and equipment. All RONCO fieldwork is fully integrated with EDO manual-clearance teams. During 2004 and 2005, RONCO cleared 2,374,381 square meters (587 acres) of land. MECHEM began operations under the UNMEE MACC coordination in December 2004. MECHEM seeks to enhance the MACC's existing manual capacity through a training component, 10 MDDs with five dog handlers, four mini-flails and four mine-protected heavy vehicles with steel wheels for ground preparation.

A Mine-safe Future

The vision for Eritrea's mine action is "an Eritrea with a physical environment that will permit free movement, uninhibited development and poverty-reduction initiatives; where victims are assisted and integrated into society, and no new victims are occurring due to mines and UXO."⁴ According to Yohannes Embaye, Head of Plans and Operations at EDA, the goal is to be mine-free⁵ in 10 years. ♦

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



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