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Somaliland

by Megan Wertz

[Mine Action Information Center]

Landmine and unexploded ordnance contamination in Somaliland is the result of the 1964 and 1977–78 border wars with Ethiopia and the 1988–91 civil war between the Siyad Barre regime and the Somali National Movement. The Barre regime troops laid most of the landmines, using mines to threaten the civilian population and protect military installations and civilian infrastructure against SNM attacks.

The Republic of Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in May 1991; however, since the international community does not recognize it as an independent state, it is unable to accede to the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention.¹ Somaliland officials have expressed their commitment to the Convention, but no legal measures have been taken to prohibit use, production, trade or stockpiling of anti-personnel mines. Somaliland has also not formally acceded to the Geneva Call-promoted *Deed of Commitment*² that has been signed by 17 faction leaders elsewhere in Somalia.

The Landmine Problem

A Landmine Impact Survey of four regions, completed in March 2003, found 357 mine-impacted communities and 276 casualties between 2001 and 2003. For 2005, the Somaliland Mine Action Center recorded 38 new mine/UXO casualties through August. Landmines and UXO block roads and access to pastureland; the most serious blockages are of drinking water sources and irrigated cropland.

No formal marking or fencing of mined areas is being implemented, due to theft of the materials and the difficulties of accurately marking mined areas that are often already at least partially used by local populations. According to Nick Bateman, a representative for Danish Demining Group, the biggest blockages due to landmines are old roads that were mined during the civil wars, but communities quickly set up detours once mines are discovered so there is little constraint in terms of mobility.³

Mine Action Program

National efforts. The National Demining Agency and the Somaliland Mine

Action Center are responsible for mine-action activities in Somaliland. SMAC, established in 1999 with United Nations Development Programme support, carries out mine-action coordination, planning and quality management with a staff of 32 professionally trained employees. With UNDP support, SMAC approved a National Policy on Mine Action, which is being reviewed in the Somaliland House of Representatives. The NDA is responsible for building local capacities for clearance, survey and mine-risk education. The main goals for SMAC are to clear access to water sources and grazing areas, clear high-impact areas by 2006 and reduce the number of incidents from mines and UXO.

Danish Demining Group. DDG began its mine-clearance operations in Somaliland in 1997. The operation includes 135 local staff, one 65-man demining team and four mobile explosive ordnance disposal teams. From 1999 to 2005, DDG cleared 30 mine-field areas and 90 battle-area clearance/EOD tasks totaling 1,380,887 square meters (341 acres). DDG's original focus was to establish a mine-clearance capacity that the Somaliland government would take over. According to Bateman, DDG stopped focusing on this goal because it is currently not a workable solution, and a mine-action capacity within the government is unlikely to be developed or effectively sustained. For the past year, DDG has instead focused on developing a final two-year phase of the Village by Village EOD Clearance Program, with help from UNICEF and Handicap International, attracting donors, and creating a workable plan to hand over responsibilities for community-based EOD work to police EOD teams when DDG leaves Somaliland in March 2008.

DDG's vision for Somaliland's mine clearance is to reduce the effects of UXO/mine contamination to a level that is no worse than other socioeconomic problems such as poor health or educational services, and does not hinder economic development. DDG believes that with additional well-targeted assistance from international NGOs, most communities will be able to effectively manage the problem. This vision has nearly been reached; ERW in Somaliland is now a

“minor blip on the humanitarian screen.”³ DDG workers are enthusiastic about the country's outlook.

Mine-risk Education

MRE in Somaliland has been unplanned and limited and no national standards have been developed. UNICEF and HI are highly active in MRE, collaborating with SMAC. The Village by Village EOD Clearance Program delivers targeted MRE, focused primarily on children because children often know where residual ERW is located, and because they have been one of the biggest at-risk groups through herding activities. Bateman says MRE is done on a limited scale because communities are managing the ERW contamination well so there is no need for large-scale MRE. The MRE message is kept simple: “Don't touch. Report.” The Village by Village program has completed some 2,650 community visits and 16,000 items of ERW have been disposed of through the program.

An End in Sight

Bateman says it best: “The light is at the end of the tunnel for Somaliland and mine clearance.”³ The hard work and dedication of agencies like DDG and HI, working with SMAC and the local communities will create a mine-safe Somaliland soon. ♦

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



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