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"Gardens of the Devil" A Report from Western Egypt

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[Editor's note: the information for this article was compiled from presentations made at "The Regional Conference on the Menace of Landmines in the Arab Countries" held in Beirut, February 11-12. Contributors are: Mr. Ayman Srour, General Mohammad Talaat Hafaz Hawari, General Youssef Sayyed Abdel Latif, and General Kamel Abdel Faraj Al Wazir.]

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Sometimes the creation of a new policy or international initiative can produce unexpected results. Such is the case in the desert of Western Egypt where the legacy of mine warfare of World War II warriors is only now being assessed seriously through the focus of current mine action activities.

Despite the fact that the great armies of Field Marshals Montgomery and Rommel fought in North Africa almost sixty years ago, the legacy of those surges and counter surges, sieges and counter sieges, is still being felt by the inhabitants and Bedouins who live or travel there.

The Problem

One might assume that sixty-year-old mines in the desert would pose no problem today. That assumption would be wrong. The area around the legendary perimeter of El Alamein was so densely seeded by the various Armies of World War II (primarily the German, Italian, and British forces) that an estimated 2,900 square kilometers are considered contaminated with millions of landmines. Even during the war, Field Marshal Rommel referred to this phenomenon as "the gardens of the devil."

Rather than the mines decaying and becoming less lethal with time, they are in fact more volatile and unpredictable. It is thought, for instance, that anti-tank landmines are becoming less stable and will require less pressure to detonate them.

8,313 peacetime casualties have been reported in Western Egypt, and as in many mine-infested countries, one can only surmise how many accidents have gone unreported or unrecorded. As usual, the personal tragedies have been multiplied by their socio-economic impact. Although the areas mined were desert regions, the military organizations often protected vital water

supplies, and defended towns, villages, and cities. Thus much of what was once a granary of the Roman Empire is today desolate and unimproved.

Other problems have exacerbated the situation. Sudden gushes of water and driving sandstorms have not only moved the mines, but have often driven them deeper into the sand. Information on the placement of the mines has also been difficult to obtain.

Although there are ten major known minefields in the region, many areas are not fenced, marked, or monitored. The Bedouins often are warned of the presence of mines by the carcasses of dead camels. Trying to identify and record these areas is made even more difficult by the lack of reliable maps or of information relating to the original placement of the landmines.

Even information on casualties and victims is elusive. When the authorities at first responded to accidents, (which were thought to occur randomly), the locations, numbers, and types of accidents were not historically collected and analyzed, but dealt with in a purely anecdotal fashion.

Early Demining Efforts

In 1981, Egypt was able to obtain demining help from the United Nations. Countries which participated in the North African World War II campaigns came forward. The United Kingdom and Germany provided funds while the Italian government provided technical demining instruction. While these efforts were of great help, they were hardly sufficient to eliminate the problem.

Regarding clearance action, Egypt has relied on its own tactical methods of finding and clearing mines. While it would prefer to use more modern equipment which would be applicable to a desert scenario, this equipment is deemed too expensive at the moment.

Egypt is now trying to maximize its clearance efforts by cooperating in a joint Arab landmine campaign started in December 1998, and is being supported by several non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Egypt's Mine Action Plans

Egypt has recently decided to address each component of mine action in an effort to eliminate its anti-personnel landmine problem.

Mine Detection

Egypt would like to improve its marking and clearance capabilities. It is particularly interested in upgrading its "tool-box" with new means of chemical detection, allowing for detection of mines deeper than one meter, and for developing map products capable of showing where mines are located. The primary effort aims at initiating a systematic program for

surveying, marking, and monitoring mine areas to better prioritize and direct clearance activities.

Mine Awareness

In the area of mine awareness, Egyptian authorities are "targeting" individuals who live near suspected and known minefields. In developing a mine awareness program, the Egyptians are receiving help from the United Nations Development Program and are authorized to coordinate with NGOs to create a more unified and comprehensive approach which will make use of electronic, as well as traditional communication methods.

They are starting with the basics. Many people in rural Western Egypt are not familiar with landmines. The program will be designed to instruct what landmines are, what they look like, where someone may expect to find them, what to do when a mine is found, what the tell-tale signs of mines are, and what to do if someone is injured.

Victim Assistance

In the past six months, Egypt has also begun to design a coordinated mine action healthcare campaign. During that time, there have been twenty-one accidents. These and other casualty figures are being used to create a much-needed database of casualty and accident information. An assistance capability is being developed which will make first aid available to people near contaminated areas and will follow up with evacuation abroad, if more complex care is necessary. NGOs have been particularly helpful in lending support to victims' families.

The Future

Egyptian officials have articulated a basic plan to address the interlocking functions of a major mine action program. Not only for the residents of Western Egypt, but for the residents in the east who are in danger of accidents from the war of 1973, such a comprehensive mine action plan is necessary.

The need is great (some estimate that 20% of mines seeded globally are in Egypt), and the expenses are enormous (Egypt estimates \$200M is necessary to solve the problem). The good news is that the Egyptians have articulated a multi-functional program which is based on open communications and coordination with other members of the mine action community, to include regional neighbors, UN agencies and NGOs.