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The Devastating Effects of Landmines: The Landmine Problem in the Sudan

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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: Dr. Hussein Al Obeid, Itimad Hachem Abdel Rahman, General Mostapha Ezzat Obeid, and General Mohammad Ibrahim.]

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Sudan truly illustrates the broad array of horrors that can be visited on a society as a result of landmine-related problems.

While we are often haunted by the image of a small child who has experienced the agony of a landmine injury, the cumulative problems caused by landmines typically do not end with the personal, physical, or even mental trauma of an individual. Invariably the net effect of multiple and frequent accidents is to inflict societal trauma, via infrastructure and economic damage, on the country at large. These burdens, shouldered by a country already struggling for survival, can eventually spell national disaster. Sudan faces such a threat today.

Other articles in the Journal illustrate mine action success stories. This report describes the complex and cumulative nature of the threat for three basic reasons:

1. Recent political events suggest that peace may return to the Sudan; plans must be made as soon as possible to address the problems of this country, which can only be described as "at risk,"
2. The problems of the Sudan are Africa's problems. The Sudan's geopolitical situation in Africa is such that its problems a priori become concerns for the entire region.
3. In order to come to grips with the nature of the landmine problem, we must first understand how this environmental cancer, if not effectively checked, can spread and debilitate an entire country.

The Nature of the Landmine Threat in the Sudan

Since 1955, the Sudan has been beset continuously by a series of nagging wars, which have bequeathed a legacy of latent and lethal consequences.

Due to the constant strife, the numerous belligerents, the diversity of landmine types, the differences in geography, and various landmine employment techniques, the threat in the Sudan defies any single approach to dealing with them. But while the nature of the threat is difficult to define, its deadly legacy is all too clear.

Since World War II, an estimated 700,000 landmine victims (military and civilian) have paid the price for the seeding of uncounted landmines, variously estimated at between one-half million and two million landmines remaining. Today, over ten million hectares are suspected of being mined; the chilling effect of this fear has not only greatly diminished agricultural and market activities, but has dampened local mine clearance efforts.

Four large areas of the country: the south, southwest, southeast, and northwest, are mined heavily, and unfortunately the problem is growing because landmines are still being seeded in the south where Muslim and Christian factions continue to wage war upon each other. The war deters many NGOs, donor countries, and foundations from actively working in the Sudan to ameliorate the landmine problem.

How the "Cancer" Spreads

The Sudan is agricultural; without its farmers and shepherds, it would cease to function as a society. Unfortunately the fear of using large tracts of land which are suspected of landmine infestation has had a seriously negative effect on the people who are the very essence of Sudanese economy and stability.

Farmers and shepherds throughout the country may run routinely afoul of the 64 types of landmines, which include chemical, bounding, or impact devices. There have even been fifty cases of anti-tank landmines triggered by buses and trucks, or exploding anti-personal landmines.

The terrain features most consistently mined in the south have been the few passable roads, which make up the tenuous delivery network of the farmers, but it does not stop there. Mines are also placed under fruit trees and by precious water sources. Many times the mines are not even buried in the soil; they are placed among the tufts of thick grass or wrapped in plastic bags and set in shallow pools or streams. Often the mines are placed concurrently with booby traps. The area of the Blue Nile has thus been densely – and heinously seeded.

The Cumulative Effect of the Threat

The threat is multi-faceted and unpredictable. Does one watch out for trip wires or for impact mines? Do you stay on the grass or on the road? Do you avoid the forests, the fields, or the streams? There are no right answers in the Sudan. The threat of personal disfigurement, disability, and death has

had a great chilling effect on the people. The result of these fears is that the agricultural worker is confused, frightened, and inactive. Many farmers and shepherds have literally stopped working; they are no longer productive or economically viable.

They of course eke out a living, but do not thrive and certainly do not contribute to national growth or prosperity. Instead, the people of the Sudan are beginning to exhibit signs of frustration, pessimism, and skepticism, which is not conducive to the health, or growth of any country.

It is not just people who are victims. Cattle and sheep are the most frequently afflicted prey of landmines. The herd and flock populations have been depleted significantly in a country where the quantity and health of livestock often determine wealth, bringing serious consequences to the Sudanese agriculture and economy.

Landmines have also had an effect on the natural ecology. Much of the wild animal population of the south, exhibiting a natural reaction to danger, have fled the region.

The National Demining Campaign

The scope of the threat and the on-going conflict in the south virtually guarantee that the landmine problem there will not be solved via a quick or simple solution. Conditions have forced organizations involved in mine action and clearance efforts in the Sudan to achieve what they can, where they can, with little attention being paid to coordinated planning, phasing, recording, analyzing, or evaluating. The result is that operations have been sporadic and only temporarily effective. It seems that for every step forward, there have been two steps back.

While large areas have been cleared, (largely with the use of metal detectors) regions are being re-seeded, wind and water are moving mines around, and clearance records are out of date and unreliable.

Mine Awareness

The greatest work to date has been done to make the populace more capable of avoiding the landmine menace. The identified target audiences are farmers, shepherds, and children. Different techniques have been developed for each.

The first major national effort was carried out by the Social Planning Office, which sponsored a series of local meetings and workshops. The first workshops focused on basic safety techniques and first-aid procedures. They were done in conjunction with plans for rehabilitation of landmine victims. The Red Cross and Red Crescent are spearheading the effort, but the task is so large that the effort is now being widened to include segments

of society (college students, women's groups, and local officials) to help and carry the message. There are also plans to use the electronic media to greater effect.

With regard to victim assistance, one small prosthetics factory is functioning and three more are planned, but work is slow and is unable to keep pace with the rate of injuries, much less regular re-fitting actions which are necessary.

Is There a Solution?

The Sudanese who are experiencing daily the multiple effects of the landmine scourge are understandably subdued. Unlike other threats, which can be met more aggressively, directly, and decisively, this dilemma is not easily discerned much less solved. One of the greatest threats of this peril, therefore, is the deadening spirit, which encumbers the populace increasingly as the loss of life, limbs, and livestock rises.

However, the people of the Sudan have hope as well as needs. The hope is expressed in the desire to conclude a real and lasting peace in the south; the needs are expressed in the requirements necessary to plan, equip, and implement a comprehensive and energetic mine action program throughout the country. The Sudanese are hoping that donors will see the need and come forth to resource demining clearance needs: modern clearance equipment, mechanical mine clearing devices, demining equipment, and mine clearance operators.

But the Sudanese desire something more than equipment and personnel. They would like the combatants to provide information and organization which will help locate mines and bring infested areas under control. They want to know how to obtain and maintain databases, how to invite and coordinate the efforts of NGOs and government officials, and they want help in planning, implementing, and maintaining a comprehensive mine action program.

Many of the ingredients of a successful mine action program already exist in the Sudan. Others, such as equipment and informational support are probably in the offing as soon as the military situation cools down. Perhaps the biggest question mark will be the ability of mine action managers to design and implement a mine action plan which will engage the will and energy of an agricultural community which has not only been devastated, but which suffers from skepticism, wariness, and a growing sense of fatalism.