

# Afghanistan

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In 1996, the Taliban seized the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul, and gained control of the northeastern part of the country. Following the terrorist attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, Coalition, U.S. and Northern Alliance militaries targeted the Taliban for sheltering Osama bin Laden. In December of that year, Afghan political groups met in Bonn, Germany, to establish means for political reconstruction. As a result, Afghanistan adopted a new constitution and set a national election for 2004. In this election—the first democratic presidential election in Afghanistan—on Oct. 9, 2004, Hamid Karzai was elected president of Afghanistan with 55 percent of the vote.<sup>1</sup>

## Landmine Problem

According to Patrick Fruchet, senior external relations officer with the U.N. Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan, landmines were first used in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation (1979–1989).<sup>2</sup> Mines continued to be emplaced throughout the country during the Soviet-sponsored regime between 1980 and 1992 and then again by the Taliban, Northern Alliance and al-Qaida along with other groups in the 1990s. Because these mines were planted indiscriminately across the country in areas such as farmland, roads and residential districts, both urban and rural land is contaminated.

"As well as having an immediate impact at the village level," says Fruchet, "mines/UXO impede overall national development as a number of large-scale public works projects cannot be undertaken without mines/UXO clearance. This includes the road system, the electrical power distribution system and major waterworks such as dams and irrigation systems."<sup>2</sup>



According to the Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan's most recent report, approximately 2,368 Afghan communities are impacted by 716 million square meters (276 square miles) of suspected contaminated areas. As many as 4.2 million Afghans live in these affected areas, located in 32 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Mines and unexploded ordnance continue to kill as many as 100 Afghans every month.<sup>3</sup>

Initially, it was believed Afghanistan contained millions of landmines. Robert Gannon, former technical advisor to the U.N. Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan and chief of party for RONCO Afghanistan, said, "The mythical 20 million mines do not exist in this country, but there is a massive UXO problem and a serious mine problem, which is hindering reconstruction and needs to be dealt with quickly and efficiently."<sup>4</sup>

## Clearance

As a signatory of the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention,<sup>5</sup> Afghanistan agreed to clear all of its minefields by 2013 and destroy all stockpiled anti-personnel mines by 2007. In addition, Afghanistan seeks to provide mine risk education to all Afghans and assistance to those who have been injured by mines.<sup>2</sup>

The U.N. Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan, a project of the U.N. Mine Action Service, is currently responsible for the planning, management and supervision of mine action activities in Afghanistan. According to Javed Habib-ul-haq, an area manager for UNMACA, the greatest success for his organization has been to "clear most of the residential areas of Kabul and other major cities in order to open them for returning citizens. This clearance has connected major roads between cities in order to reestablish personal and commercial infrastructure." Habib-ul-

haq says, "Clearance not only [allows for the return of] refugees and internally displaced persons, but also opens job opportunities that further develop our country. The cost for demining balances its benefit for Afghanistan's economy."<sup>6</sup>

From 1989 until September 2005, RONCO Consulting Corporation was involved in the designing and implementation of humanitarian demining operations in mine-affected countries.<sup>7</sup> Under a contract with the U.S. Department of State, RONCO provided technical clearance support to local Afghan non-governmental organizations. Advisers from RONCO helped Afghan NGOs upgrade and improve their operations and safety procedures, particularly when dealing with unexploded cluster bombs. By the end of 2003, RONCO had cleared over 4 square kilometers (1.5 square miles) of land in this area, along with clearing land at the Kabul National Academy and at Special Forces operating locations. More recently, RONCO destroyed over 4,000 items of UXO from 120,000 square meters (30 acres) at a subsurface clearance site in northern Afghanistan in about two weeks.<sup>8</sup>

Gannon says, "We have successfully cleared 20 sites in the past 18 months ranging in size from 23,000 square meters [about 6 acres] to 1.4 million square meters [approximately 351 acres]. All of these sites are either being constructed on or have been completed by the prime contractor and [are] in use by the client."<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

Because Afghanistan can have as many as 100 landmine-related casualties a month, organizations continue to educate the public about the threat of mines. According to Habib-ul-haq, UNMACA facilitates mine risk education for refugees through television and radio programs, with mine-related posters and by traveling village to village to spread the message. Remaining hopeful for the future, Habib-ul-haq says, "We know it will be very difficult to be 'mine free'<sup>9</sup> by 2013, but we hope efforts and funding will help us get there."<sup>6, 10</sup>

## Endnotes

1. "Afghanistan." CIA—The World Fact Book. June 2, 2005.<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/af.html>. Accessed June 5, 2005.
2. E-mail correspondence from Patrick Fruchet, Senior External Relations Officer, United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan. Nov. 12, 2005.
3. Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan Fact Sheet. October 2005.
4. E-mail interview with Robert Gannon, Chief of Party, RONCO Afghanistan. June 12, 2005.
5. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*. Ottawa, Canada. Sept. 18, 1997.[http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban\\_trty.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban_trty.htm). Accessed Oct. 10, 2005.
6. Interview with Javed Habib-ul-haq, Area Manager, UNMACA. June 26, 2005.
7. DynCorp was awarded the demining contract from the U.S. Department of State as of Sept. 1, 2005.
8. "Worldwide Demining Activities." RONCO Consulting Corporation.<http://www.demining.com/hmc/activities.html>. Accessed Nov. 17, 2005.
9. Editor's Note: Some countries and mine action organizations are urging the use of the term "mine free," while others are espousing the term "mine safe" or "impact free." "Mine free" connotes a condition where all landmines have been cleared, whereas the terms "mine safe" or "impact free" refer to the condition in which landmines no longer pose a credible threat to a community or country.
10. Working in Afghanistan toward the country's clearance goal are many organizations funded by the United States, Canada, Japan, Germany and the United Nations as well as many other donors.

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