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Iraq

Country Profile
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Iraq

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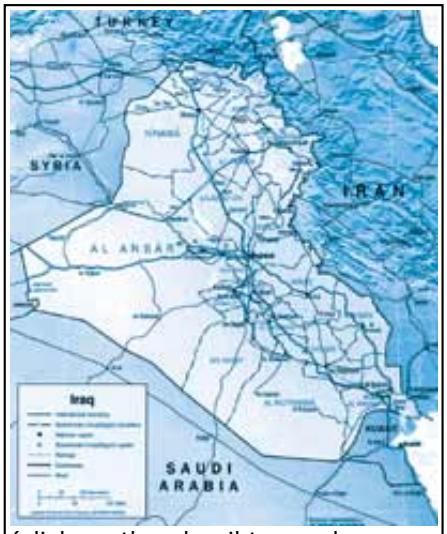
History

Iraq is one of the world's most heavily mined countries, with a landmine problem that stems from four decades of conflict. Though some landmines discovered date back to World War II, the majority of the problem is a consequence of more recent war-related incidents. The country faced internal conflict in the 1960s and 1970s and later became involved in the Iraq-Iran war from 1980 to 1988.



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Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's government in April 2003, Iraqi officials have not produced a policy on banning anti-personnel mines. After the Coalition invasion, the Iraqi military abandoned large quantities of ammunition. (See related articlein this issue.) These abandoned sites were often located in populated areas or near residential neighborhoods. Much of the ammunition is unstable, posing a threat to those nearby. Often, people attempt to dispose of the bombs themselves rather than wait for official clearance teams, putting themselves and others in great danger.

The Landmine Problem

The most contaminated areas are in densely populated regions in the central and southern areas of Iraq. According to the National Mine Action Authority, 21.6 percent of the Iraqi population lives within less than a mile of areas highly contaminated by explosive remnants of war. The majority of landmine contamination is found throughout northern Iraq and along the Iraq-Iran border.

The *Landmine Monitor Report* estimates one million tons of ammunition, including landmines, are located in unsecured sites throughout the country. At the end of 2004, 105 of these locations had been discovered, each housing more than 100 bunkers of ammunition. Not only do amateurs attempt to dispose of the ammunition, but many of these locations are unguarded and exposed to the elements, making the explosives highly unstable.

Before the start of the current war and during combat, armed forces under Hussein's former regime placed landmines at road junctions, along riverbeds, at water supply points and near oil wells. Thousands of landmines were placed around Kirkuk and Mosul, as well as along front lines between Kurdish- and Iraqi-controlled areas. Troops have also encountered landmines on roads between Erbil and the cities of Kirkuk, Guwer, Mosul and Makhmer.

Mine Action Planning

Several organizations have programs in place to solve the daunting problem of landmines in Iraq. Each organization is faced with a few problems, and planning is hindered by the lack of clear governmental reconstruction and developmental plans, accurate impact information, and a predictable security situation. Regardless, these organizations are steadfast in their efforts to alleviate the problem of landmines in Iraq.

Mines Advisory Group. MAG has been conducting humanitarian mine action in Iraq since 1992. During the most recent conflict, efforts have been focused on the delivery of short-term emergency mine action in Iraqi territory. In the past two years alone, MAG has cleared more than one million mines and unexploded ordnance. This action has freed several million square meters of land[1] for use by the local population.

MAG's Iraq staff is composed of 660 national and 13 international staff working in the seven governorates. MAG fields several assets, including 21 mine action teams, 10 community liaison/mine risk education teams, two Armtrac 100 mini-flail machines and operating teams, and two mine detection dog teams. Though events following the 2003 Coalition invasion and fall of Saddam Hussein's regime have impeded some activities, MAG "remains operational and is able to deliver much-needed mine action."[2]

NMAA. The National Mine Action Authority is responsible for strategic planning and budgeting, project coordination, donor relations, setting national mine action standards and maintaining the national mine action database. In 2003, the U.S. Department of State made numerous efforts to aid demining efforts in Iraq, including establishing the NMAA. Working with the NMAA, DOS went on to help establish Regional Mine Action Centers in Erbil and Basra. The NMAA is also planning to develop an RMAC in central Iraq.

The NMAA works closely with other organizations, including the U.N. Development Programme, to develop and coordinate a mine action support strategy in Iraq. Through collaboration, the NMAA expects to reduce 50 percent of the impact from explosive remnants of war in five years if operations are not affected by a lack of security or funding. Its current strategy aims at developing "a sustainable national mine action program to address the needs of Iraqi communities and vulnerable groups affected by landmines and explosive remnants of war."[3]

Solving the Landmine Problem

Without the information a Landmine Impact Survey can provide, it is hard to determine a timeline for when Iraq will be mine-safe. One thing for sure, however, is that organizations like MAG and the NMAA are making progress in alleviating the problem. The continual progress of these organizations will only lead to an improvement in the landmine situation in Iraq.

Endnotes

1. 1 million square meters is approximately equal to 0.386 square mile.
2. "Iraq Programme." Mines Advisory Group.http://www.mag.org.uk/magtest/magwproj/projirq.htm. Accessed Aug. 23, 2005.
3. "Iraq Profile." United Nations Mine Action Service. Updated March 5, 2005.http://www.mineaction.org/country.asp?c=95. Accessed Aug. 23, 2005.

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1. Carstairs, Tim. "Humanitarian Mine Action in Northern Iraq." *Journal of Mine Action*. April 12, 2004. http://maic.jmu.edu/journal/5.3/focus/Tim_Crastairs/tim_Crastairs.htm. Accessed Aug. 29, 2005.
2. "Landmine Situation in Iraq." Mine Action Information Center. Updated March 3, 2003.http://maic.jmu.edu/spotlight/2003_4/2003_4.htm. Accessed Aug. 8, 2005.
3. "Iraq." *Landmine Monitor Report* 2004. http://www.icbl.org/lm/2004/iraq. Accessed Aug. 23, 2005.

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