

From the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean: The World's Largest Mine Field?

The latest conflict between India and Pakistan has spurred both countries to renew the mining of their borders. This could result in the creation of the largest mine field the world has ever seen.



Indian soldiers survey the scene after a landmine blast killed at least 13 people and injured more than 35. c/o AP

by JJ Scott, MAIC

History of Conflicts

Introduction

Precariously situated between India and Pakistan, the province of Kashmir has been a source of constant tension between these two nations since their formation in 1947. Now, the dispute over this territory has led Indian and Pakistani military units to renew defensive mine-laying activities that may eventually create the world's largest mine field. Cutting a swath up to three miles (five km) deep along the entire Indian-Pakistani border 1,800 miles (3,000 km).¹ The Indian government cites the December 13, 2001 attack on its Parliament as evidence that its already fortified borders need further reinforcement. Both governments claim that all mines are being laid solely for defensive military purposes; however, many civilians along the border dispute that claim.

When the partition of British India was first discussed in 1947, Pakistan hoped to acquire all Muslim majority areas, including Kashmir. However, the status of this province was left undecided in the final agreement of independence pending the decision of Kashmir's king. After three months, Pakistan tired of waiting for the king's answer and launched an invasion to help speed up his decision-making process. To the Pakistanis' surprise and disappointment, the panicked king signed a treaty of accession with India and invited the Indian army to assist in the removal of Pakistani forces. The UN stepped in and demanded that a plebiscite be held to determine the fate of the province once the Pakistani army had withdrawn from Kashmir. The Pakistanis refused to give up the land they had taken over. India never held the plebiscite, and the two nations have battled over Kash-

mir ever since. Declared war has broken out three times, in 1947–48, 1965 and 1971. The latest developments follow a nearly unbroken 55-year-long chain of confrontation.

On December 13, five Islamic militants stormed the Indian Parliament building, resulting in 14 deaths. India announced that these men were Pakistani-funded Islamic terrorists, a claim that Pakistan disputes. Nevertheless, India implemented increased defensive measures, ostensibly to keep terrorists from entering India from Pakistan. India immediately mobilized an estimated one million soldiers, placing them all along the border to guard against infiltration. Pakistan responded by sending 800,000 of their own soldiers to the border areas.² Apparently, these heavily armed men are not enough, as both countries have resumed the mining of their borders at a rate unseen since 1971.

Current Landmine Situation

Details are hard to come by in a war zone, but anecdotal evidence and the few official reports released by the two governments imply that India and Pakistan are creating a monstrous mine field. Experts cited by the *Toronto National Post* estimate that soldiers would need to lay one mine per square meter to create an effective deterrent, leading to an estimate of three million landmines to cover the entire border with a mine field a single meter wide. Obviously, real armies do not lay mines in such a manner. Some areas will likely remain mine free while soldiers litter strategically important zones with mine fields stretching several kilometers from the border. In the January 12, 2002 issue of the *Kashmir Times*, Colonel G. K. Reddy (Ret.) announced that a single 12 km stretch along the Line of Control (LoC)—which separates Indian and Pa-

kistani areas of rule in Kashmir—conceals up to 5,000 landmines.³ Such figures cannot be accurately extrapolated, but if these numbers even remotely reflect the situation along the rest of the LoC, this region represents the latest, largest challenge for the humanitarian demining community.

Civilians and Landmines

"We have never used landmines in any civilian areas. Landmines are solely used for defensive military purposes," claimed B.S. Saini, second secretary at the High Commission of India, in the *Toronto National Post*.⁴ "We have to defend our borders, and landmines are a very cost-effective way to do this," he added. India and Pakistan are two of several nations that have declared landmines to be an integral part of their national defense plans. After all, they are cheap, readily available and easy to emplace and maintain. Landmines effectively deny land to the opposition. Unfortunately, landmines also deny land to the very civilians they are supposedly protecting, governmental claims notwithstanding.

Civilians are always the unintentional victims of landmines, the unavoidable "collateral damage" appearing on casualty lists and in newspaper articles. Respectable governments strive to reduce the number of civilians impacted, but battlefields and farmers' fields intersect all too often. A recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* includes an interview with Darbara Singh, an Indian living less than a mile from the Pakistani border. "We cannot stay in our houses, as the fear of guns is always looming over our heads. We cannot visit our fields, as landmines have been laid there. Where shall we go?" he queries.⁵ Singh is not alone. The intensified fighting has displaced more than 70,000 people over the last several months, many of whom must wander through newly-mined fields while searching for a place to resettle.⁶ Citizens of border villages have reported mine blasts almost daily, often triggered by returning refugees who are unaware of recently laid mines.⁷

No Alternatives to Landmines?

The militaries of both nations acknowledge the threat that mines pose to civilians, but they insist that it is better

than the alternative: full-scale war. India and Pakistan both possess limited-range nuclear arms to complement their full arsenals of conventional weapons. Both countries insist that they would never be the first to fire nuclear missiles, but retaliatory fire is another matter. If the possibility of a sudden mass invasion existed, both nations would surely be on hair-trigger alert. Nuclear war would then be only a panic-struck president's impulsive reaction away. Landmines remove the threat of a surprise invasion, forcing military strategic planners to re-route invading forces and giving the defensive side more time to react without overreacting. Rakesh Sood, an Indian ambassador, outlined India's goals for laying the mine fields, saying they would provide an "obstacle system" and "a psychological barrier" to any invading force.⁸ In these countries' (and many others') military doctrines, landmines serve a legitimate, necessary and non-replaceable function, however detrimental they may be to society.

These "benefits" to landmine use apply only when militaries use landmines in a responsible manner. This would include marking all mine fields, notifying civilians of every mine field's location, and promptly removing all mines once they have served their purpose. Both armies appear to be falling far short of these standards in their current mine-laying exercises. India in particular has had trouble with unmarked mine fields. In the month of December alone, over 40 Indians, civilians and soldiers included, were killed along the LoC by Indian-laid mines. In response, the Indian army launched an inquiry to determine if soldiers had followed accepted doctrine while laying the mines.⁹ When a country's own defensive mines are blowing up a country's own soldiers, standard operating procedures (SOPs) are certainly not being followed. And if soldiers themselves are unaware of the mine fields' locations, civilians are certainly at even more risk.

Despite such evidence, spokesmen for the Indian military insist that soldiers laying mines methodically record the location of every single mine. Then, when the time comes, the same soldiers who implanted the mines excavate them. Unfortunately, the time *never* comes for many mine fields. Some fields are pol-

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luted with mines emplaced decades ago; their potency has not diminished over the years. These fields caused more than 2,000 mine-related casualties between 1947 and 1989, and this number is rising faster as more mines are deployed.³ It is likely that the swarms of mines being deployed now will also remain for many years, their density decreased only by wandering civilians and unfortunate animals.

Conclusion

India and Pakistan have a long history of warfare that has often centered on the province of Kashmir. Landmines have been used throughout these conflicts, but the recent attack on the Indian Parliament has sparked an epidemic of mine laying that dwarfs any prior use of these weapons. Millions of landmines could eventually litter thousands of miles along the entire Indian-Pakistani border, creating a mine field stretching from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. Both governments insist that they are minimizing impact on civilians by following standard marking and reporting procedures, but reports from the border areas present a different view. Large as the impact of these mines is today, their effect could stretch decades into the future, claiming new victims with every passing year. ■

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