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Socio-Economic Impact of Landmines in Iraq

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**Socio-Economic Impact of Landmines in Iraq**

**Background**

The socio-economic impact of landmines, UXO and stockpiled munitions extends across multiple areas, including:

- Accessing public areas
- Sabotaging meals from mines/UXO
- Accessing land for agriculture
- Repairing infrastructure

The indirect impact of landmines includes malnutrition/starvation and the spread of infectious diseases, in part due to the inability to repair water distribution systems and to provide public health services in regions isolated by mines and UXO. People and UXO are causing lives, disabling future generations, creating injury and fear, and hindering the return to normalcy.

**Accessing Public Areas**

Johan Van Der Merwe, Technical Advisor with UNOPS, and Colonel Dyck, chairman of MineTech International, describe the hazards Iraqis face that threaten normal activity and disrupt socio-economic redevelopment.

"Kids playing with propellant in small arm shells. They light the propellant on fire, making an instantaneous flame. Many sustain flash burns from being too close when they ignite the propellant," said Colonel Dyck.

"In the streets of Baghdad, children are reportedly playing soccer among explosive remnants of war, UXO, and stockpiled munitions. This is a dangerous game that has caused many deaths and injuries," said the ICRC.

"In April, CARE workers in Baghdad have reported at least 400,000 enemy shells and UXO were unexploded, placed near homes, schools, and hospitals," continued Mr. Mohamed Al Haddad, the ICRC's head of operations in Iraq.

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**by Jennette Townsend, MAIC**

**International Committee of the Red Cross**

Since conflict began in March, the ICRC has been working almost without interruption at health facilities in Iraqi main cities such as Baghdad, Basra, Bagdad, Qadisiya, Diyala, Babel, Karbala, Najaf, Sulaymaniyah and Wasit. Despite massive loss of life and destruction of hospitals, the ICRC continues to work in hospitals and health centers in Baghdad and other parts of the country. Personnel are working to provide medical aid to those in need.

"The ICRC is working in more than 20 hospitals in Baghdad and other parts of the country. Personnel are working to provide medical aid to those in need," said Mr. Mohamed Al Haddad, the ICRC's head of operations in Iraq.

**Assisting Families**

The ICRC has been helping families in need in several ways, including:

- Providing food and medicine
- Assisting with shelter and housing
- Providing water and sanitation

The ICRC has also been working to clear landmines and UXO from areas where people are living. They have been able to clear some areas, but there are still many unexploded ordinances.

"In April, the ICRC cleared a large area of landmines near a school in Baghdad. The area was filled with landmines and UXO, but we were able to clear it and provide a safe environment for the children," said Mr. Mohamed Al Haddad, the ICRC's head of operations in Iraq.

**Amnesty International**

International delegates saw many children playing around landmines located immediately next to the homes of university students. The staff told the delegates that they had asked for help in removing landmines, but no such assistance had been received.

"Children play with landmines and UXO, which is a disaster," said Mr. Mohamed Al Haddad, the ICRC's head of operations in Iraq.

"We are working to clear landmines and UXO from areas where people are living. However, it is a slow process and we need more support from the international community," said Mr. Mohamed Al Haddad, the ICRC's head of operations in Iraq.

"In May, the ICRC cleared a large area of landmines near a school in Baghdad. The area was filled with landmines and UXO, but we were able to clear it and provide a safe environment for the children," said Mr. Mohamed Al Haddad, the ICRC's head of operations in Iraq.

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area located next to a playground. According to Johan Van Der Merwe, observed Iraqi convoys and anti-missile truck roads and in defensive positions—under bridges or behind mounds of sand or in small towns and villages. "Fully armed tanks are abandoned in the middle of the road. Anti-aircraft cannons had munitions still in the bridge block; all it took was to pull the pin to set the trigger and the shot would be fired." Several mine incidents along roads have been reported. On May 28, there were two incidents on the main airport road where AP mines were placed in plastic bags and, 11 incidents were reported on the Baghdad-Kirkuk road. The level of safety on roads will likely not improve until mine and UXO contamination is under control.

Salvaging Metal From Mines/UXO

Johan Van Der Merwe emphasizes that in a society with sanctions "nothing is left; everything is recycled." He comments on the amount of metal used for driving past an antelope killed by Lions in Africa; "after a while, all you see is the white bones." Likewise, each day he passed the abandoned vehicles, it was stripped more, until all that was left was the skeleton of the vehicle. Every nut and bolt has a use. Local market UOX and stocked munitions also attract civilians. Adults take packaging from depots and munitions factories and use the wood packaging material for firewood. Civilians have also been breaking apart munitions to get brass casings. There are huge amounts of explosives in private homes as people search for scrap copper, brass and aluminium with little regard for danger.

Locals steal farming marking fields, placing the general population in considerable risk. Johan Van Der Merwe explains, "The markings are taken back into society where they are used as rope and a picker can be used in fences. As a result, kids play in at-risk areas and adults steal farm fences. In the Basta region, MineTech Interna-

tional counteracted the problem by using mine risk education (MRE) teams to tell locals that if the markers continued to be seized, it would be no longer able to assist them and the UXO would remain indefinitely.

MineTech describes landmines and UXO as a "vital economic resource" for many poor people who, in addition to salvaging scrap metal, sometimes use the explosive content of mines and UXO. In 2001, MAG reported an incident where a man lost four of his children and two friends in mine/UXO salvaging accidents. He was injured twice while collecting scrap and his two remaining children bear scars from the incident that killed their siblings.

However, the legitimacy of the looting is often questioned, as Colonel Dyck mentions. He explains that bottled gas is widely available and can be bought for very little. In fact, all cooking is done with gas. Often looting for firewood is not legitimate. Dyck tells of a incident where, after seeing a train pass for the first time since the conflict, women from a suburb outside of Basra came out and dug up the woodchips or ties, destroying the rail for no apparent reason. Dyck observed that most of the infrastructure damage has been done by the Iraqis themselves. Even the MineTech camp was looted. "The destruction is unbelievable," says Dyck, "because there was no purpose in it. They did not take useful things." Since the war, anything that was used for the government is being destroyed, even though Iraqis could potentially use what they are destroying to help themselves. However, in a number of places where Iraqis need help, they are doing it themselves. Dyck saw Iraqis using a crane to repair power lines to restore electricity. He says, "Some people are trying to make it work and some not." While, "In general, it is tremendous and growing daily, creating insur-

mountable problems," says Colonel Dyck. In reference to the huge amount of ammunition, he explains that there is no way of dealing with it immediately. Therefore, we need policing to prevent locals from getting into minefields and dumping scrap brass casings and leaving propulsion on the floor. Propellant burns like a match head—if it is scraped, it will burn. Given this, the mine removal teams would no longer be able to assist them and the UXO would remain indefinitely.

Scrap metal remains a present danger; the problem of dealing or selling to market still remains. MineTech’s Mine Kansas City had a meeting with the Shiekh of Basra where the information is exchanged about whether these two measures would be enough to stop the UXO problem. Stacked munitions now also present a danger. Mine disposal is difficult, doing nothing or selling to market for scrap is equally dangerous. In the villages in northern Iraq were affected socially and economically by landmines and UXO. In 2001 alone, about 300 people per month had been involved in accidents related to mines or UXO.

In 2002, UNOPS completed its Landmine Impact Survey of the three northern governorates and determined that grazing and planting crops are the two main activities denied land in northern Iraq. Over a quarter of the population engages in herding activity and about 22 percent of the population raises crops. Grazing areas are most affected by landmines, especially around hillsides and mountains that were former military protective areas. The shepherds and their prominence throughout the region, this figure suggests that one out of three mine-

impaired communities is affected by landmines planted in grazing areas.

Repairing Infrastructure

Minefields and UXO pose an immediate threat to local authorities trying to re-establish the infrastructures. At present, one of the most pressing issues is water contamination, it takes a special kind of person to be a "water worker," but neither he nor the water treatment equipment exist. Unfortunately, the ground is so soft that a lot of the bombs have not gone off. Colonel Dyck explains that a lot of the farmers have been affected by cluster bombs. MineTech has been clearing beaches where the main crop seems to be tomatoes. The locals are receptive and very thankful for their help. One farmer gave them tomatoes as a token of appreciation, "nothing for the work," he passed the day he passed the abandoned vehicle, it is left; everything is left; everything is left. Likewise, each day he passed the abandoned vehicles, it was stripped more, until all that was left was the skeleton of the vehicle. Every nut and bolt has a use. Local market UOX and stocked munitions also attract civilians. Adults take packaging from depots and munitions factories and use the wood packaging material for firewood. Civilians have also been breaking apart munitions to get brass casings. There are huge amounts of explosives in private homes as people search for scrap copper, brass and aluminium with little regard for danger.

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**References**


6. International Committee of the Red Cross. "Iraq: A dangerous game with explosive remnants of war among garbage piling up along the roads. UNICEF has expressed concern that refuse collection activities in Baghdad are being affected by the threat of UXO. There are thought to be around 50,000 to 90,000 UXO remain in the city that are contaminated with cluster bombs and caches of dumped munitions. Dyck also mentions a situation in which Iraqis turned an ammunition dump into a toilet, creating a situation that was both unpleasant and difficult to clean up.

**Conclusion**

An emergency assessment of the socio-economic impact of mines and UXO is being implemented throughout the summer by different mine clearance agencies: MineTech and MAG in southern Iraq, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVA) in the north. The assessments will provide a clearer picture of the long-term socio-economic impact of landmines in Iraq.

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