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Chad

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by JJ Scott, MAIC

History

After centuries of domination by several autonomous and constantly warring kingdoms, the land that would eventually make up the nation of Chad was subjugated by France in the 1890s. The French colonized Chad only half-heartedly, using it primarily as a source of raw materials and unskilled labor, never bothering to institute any unifying or modernizing policies. Chad gained its independence from France in 1960 but immediately became ensnared in a morass of ethnic warfare. Like so many other post-independence African nations, internal strife—sporadically punctuated by outside incursions—delayed all national development programs for decades. In Chad, a 1975 military coup and several invasions by Libya retarded progress until 1990, when a tentative and unstable peace was finally achieved. Since then, the government has come to terms with most rebel groups, settled the Libyan border dispute, drafted a new, democratic constitution and held presidential and National Assembly elections. Unfortunately, most power remains in the hands of a northern ethnic oligarchy whose followers instigated a new rebellion in 1998, damaging any hopes for the national development and improved living conditions that only lasting peace can bring.



Landmine/UXO Overview

Chad is a comparatively low-profile country in the mine action community. The National Mine Action Center (HCND) is one of the few in existence that did not form as an extension of a United Nations peacekeeping mission. The 30 years of conflicts in Chad never drew international attention, leaving most potentially helpful donor nations almost completely ignorant of the Chadian landmine situation, which is, nonetheless, quite serious. A Level 1 Impact Survey was recently completed, revealing that an estimated one million landmines and a few hundred thousand pieces of UXO currently affect almost 200 communities, primarily in northern Chad. Reports indicate that most minefields are a mix of AT and AP mines; up to a third of these mines may be booby-trapped.

Casualties

Operating in one of the poorest nations in the world, the HCND does not have the funds to conduct reliable or comprehensive surveys of landmine victims. No yearly casualty data is available; no attempt has even been made at estimating how many Chadian citizens have been killed or injured by landmines. To compound the problems facing statisticians in Chad, a sizable nomadic population roams the northern half of the country. Most casualties that occur among these wanderers probably go unreported, as nomads do not frequent hospitals and are not readily available to surveyors. One must take these challenges into account when ascertaining the reliability of the latest casualty numbers to come out of Chad: approximately 300 mine- and UXO-related casualties in the last two years. No matter how close this is to the reality of the casualty situation in Chad, there is no question that landmines are a significant problem, adversely affecting the nation's socio-economic situation.

Demining

The HCND relies heavily on donor support to fund its activities, receiving aid mainly from the United States, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Japan, Great Britain and Italy. Most funds procured thus far have been spent on establishing infrastructure, developing long-term mine action plans, training deminers and carrying out a Level 1 Impact Survey. The German organization HELP is the only group currently carrying out demining operations in Chad. To date, they have destroyed 1,150 mines, 17,000 pieces of UXO and four tons of small-caliber munitions, returning 1.2 million square meters of land back to productive use. They have found that most mines in Chad are laid chaotically, a demining challenge that has been compounded by extremely limited access to minefield maps.

Reality Check

France's apathetic view towards Chad during the colonial period, combined with 30 years of post-independence warfare, has yielded a nation-state that exists more certainly and solidly on paper than in reality. Even when viewed within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the absolute poverty and lack of development in Chad is astonishing. Public services are nonexistent throughout most of the country and are inconsistent and unreliable where they do exist. There is only one hospital to serve the entire northern portion of the country, requiring many who need medical care to journey several days for treatment. Attempting to uphold the pillars of mine action within such a disorganized, unfortunate country has proven to be a challenge, to say the least. Meeting that challenge is the goal of the mine action practitioners currently operating in the forgotten nation of Chad.

Contact Information

Lt. Col. Mohamoud Adam Becher
High Committee for National Demining
PO Box 3179
N'Djamena, Chad
Tel: 00-235-52-4706
Fax: 00-235-52-4705
E-mail: mabechir@intnet.td
Website: www.mineactionchad.org