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## NPA: Improving Lives in the Middle East and Throughout the World

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**"Seeing mine clearance as the first step in a general improvement of the population's living conditions is quite fundamental. Long-term rebuilding and development after the mines have been removed is one of Norwegian People's Aid's (NPA) main aims."- *Mines: The Silent Killers* by Norwegian People's Aid.**

by Sarah B. Taylor, MAIC

### Introduction

An organization based on human equality, NPA "...endeavors to improve the conditions under which individuals live, and to contribute to a more humane society for all."<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, landmine issues are a fundamental element of their mission. Since 1992, when they entered Cambodia, NPA has been heavily involved in mine clearance throughout the world, becoming one of the world's largest humanitarian mine clearance organizations and concentrating most of their labors on educating local populations about the dangers of landmines. More recently, they began to focus their efforts in the Middle East and Northern Africa, where they began an extensive program in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1995 and a program for refugees from Western Sahara in Algeria in 1998. NPA initially struggled to begin its program in Iraqi Kurdistan because they have been unable to obtain permission to bring equipment into the area; however, in recent years, they have been more successful. NPA's efforts in Western Sahara and Algeria have also been fruitful and were concluded in June 2000.

### Iraqi Kurdistan

#### *Background*

Six governates make up Iraqi Kurdistan: Arbil, Sulaimanya, Dohuk, Kirkuk and parts of Dyala and Nineva. As a whole, Iraqi Kurdistan borders Syria, Turkey and Iran and comprises 18 percent of the total area of Iraq. Approximately 3.9 million people inhabit this northern part of Iraq. The majority of the population consists of Kurds, but Arabs, Assyrians, Cladian and Turkmen live there as well, under the conflicting control of the Kurdistan Patriotic Union (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). These opposed groups maintain separate administrative, legislative and executive structures. Numerous



A NPA volunteer works with a local amputee in Kurdistan.

landmines exist throughout the region and along all its borders, many of them planted during conflicts in the 1960s and the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. The Iraqi government also planted a significant number of mines in

the area in an attempt to control the Kurds.

### *The Program*

NPA began its mission in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1994, when it conducted a "Fact Finding Mission" to research the numerous problems that afflicted the people of Iraqi Kurdistan. It first entered Iraqi Kurdistan in 1995 with the hopes of eventually implementing both mine-awareness and clearance programs and immediately began an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) project. NPA struggled at the onset due to difficulties in getting permission to bring metal detectors into the area and because of the worsening conflict between the PUK and KDP. Thus, the EOD project had to be postponed until May 1997, and when it commenced, it had been reduced to one EOD team for the remainder of the year. NPA began training local people in demining in 1998 and by May had two trained demining teams. As the program grew in 2000, two more teams were trained and began demining.



A NPA deminer prods a possible landmine.

In 2000, NPA also strived to improve the medical conditions in the area. In fact, NPA now works with the Trauma Care Foundation (TCF) to improve the survival rate and living conditions of landmine victims. With the help of NPA, TCF has created a "Village University" in Iraqi Kurdistan, in which TCF trains local people in emergency first aid and other areas of health in order to create a population of local people who are able to immediately help victims of landmine accidents.

Thus far, 2001 has been another successful year for the program. The staff now consists entirely of local Kurds, holding positions at all levels including management and technical ranks. This makes the program in Iraqi Kurdistan NPA's first to achieve total nationalization. However, because funding was recently reduced, the number of workers was decreased from 100 to 44 during the year, and the project was cut to only three demining teams. Now, backed solely by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who provided NPA with 2,500,000 NOK in 2001, demining is conducted based on priorities that are determined by both local authorities and communities. The team was still able to clear an area of 69,278 m<sup>2</sup> and to destroy 237 mines and 113 UXO.

Improving demining methods and equipment is another goal of NPA. In Iraqi Kurdistan, much of the demining that is conducted is done in the same manner that it was in 1945, through manual clearance with the use of metal detectors. However, 99 percent of the metal detectors' signals indicate something other than a landmine. This and the process of manual demining make progression slow and strenuous. NPA strives to create a "toolbox" of demining equipment in an effort to make the process more efficient. Currently, NPA works with the Foundation for Industrial and Technological Research to create new technology that will help to distinguish between landmines and other objects in the ground.

## **Western Sahara/Algeria**

### *Background*

During 1975, troops from Morocco occupied the northern portion of Western Sahara, and Mauritanian forces dominated the south. The native population of the Saharawi felt divided, and consequently tens of thousands migrated to the eastern part of the country. Soon military forces attacked these civilians,

and the Saharawi were forced into the harsh desert conditions of southwest Algeria. Today over 170,000 people live in four camps that are all located around the water-wells near the oasis town of Tindouf.

### *The Program*

In Algeria, the Saharawi population began to live in refugee camps. It was in Algeria and at these camps that NPA began a mine-awareness program in 1998. NPA's goal was to educate refugees about the landmines they would encounter when they returned to their native Western Sahara, and more importantly, the dangers that these landmines possessed. More specifically, NPA wanted to warn people so that accidents could be prevented when they returned to their homes. Supported by the Norwegian Department of Foreign Affairs, the program consisted of 40 local employees. These employees were trained to educate others and then sent to four different camps. In addition to educating the Saharawi about the dangers of landmines, instructors also taught courses in teaching and English.

The program in Western Sahara/Algeria was extremely successful. After two years of educating the refugees, an evaluation was conducted which confirmed that the vast majority of the population had been educated and had a clear understanding of the threat of landmines in their native land. As a result, NPA decided that their activities in the refugee camps of Algeria were both complete and successful and thus terminated the program.

### **Conclusion**

The NPA publication *Mines: The Silent Killers* states, "Life and limbs are saved by the people themselves gaining an understanding of living with the problem." NPA strives to help mine-stricken countries become self-sufficient in all matters relating to landmines, including clearance, education and medicine. Considering that Iraqi Kurdistan has between five and 10 million landmines and that over 170,000 Saharawi refugees remain isolated in Algeria, this is both an immensely important and difficult task. NPA, however, approaches their task diligently as they fight to end the destruction caused by landmines.

*\*All photos courtesy of NPA.*

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