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Current Mine Action Situation in Afghanistan

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Millions of landmines littering Afghani soil pose a horrifying threat to civilians fleeing their homelands and soldiers entering the area in response to the rising war on terrorism. Meanwhile, those attempting to clear these lands face their own malicious enemies.

by Susanna Sprinkel, MAIC

Introduction

As a result of a rising war on terrorism sparked by the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, the Afghani people are on the move once again. Fear of militant authorities and air strikes have led many to abandon their homes and head for rural areas and neighboring countries, but the largest enemy they potentially face is one they have grown well accustomed to: landmines. Landmines have been one of the most prevalent threats in Afghanistan over the past two decades. These seven-10 million landmines hiding beneath Afghani soil may strike harder than any terrorist-induced threat.



Today, 80 percent of villages in Afghanistan are in ruins. c/o ICRC

Internally Displaced Persons

Most civilians know how severe the landmine problem is, but once they leave the comfort of their villages and travel into unknown territory, the threat rises again. They no longer know where to safely search for food and water and as the urgency for these resources increases, their caution for finding them decreases. A good portion of mine-infested areas have been marked by red paint, but the majority of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) will be traveling in the dark in order to avoid Taliban authorities and will be unable to identify the markings. According to the Organization for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR), the number of landmine victims in Afghanistan has already increased from ten to twelve injuries daily to fifteen injuries daily, and they expect these numbers to continue growing as conditions worsen.

Nearly half of landmine victims die seeking medical treatment because it often takes several days to reach the nearest hospital. Most hospitals are not equipped with the necessary supplies or expertise to handle these injuries, and mine action organizations in Afghanistan, who would normally assist the victims, have been ordered by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan (UNOCHA) to cease operations until conditions are more secure. However, NGOs including OMAR and the Mine Detection and Dog Center (MDC) continue to provide emergency response teams for each of the five major regions in Afghanistan. OMAR is also conducting mine awareness operations geared towards IDPs in certain regions. Reports indicate that most civilians are relocating into the Herat province, where they receive regular mine awareness education.

Afghanistan has faced a series of drought and famine over the past few years making food and water scarce in many areas. As relief organizations attempt to

supply Afghani people with necessary resources, they have found landmines to be one of their biggest obstacles. Attempts have been made to airdrop packages into Afghanistan, particularly the central highlands and areas along the Pakistani border. Both of these regions are likely to contain mines and in order to avoid being detected, the planes must drop the food from too high of an elevation to safely monitor where they are landing. As most families are desperate for any food they can find, they are likely to flee into hazardous territory. There is an exceptional concern for children who are separated from their families while fleeing authorities and who would be easily attracted to the falling parcels.

Refugees

Once a civilian leaves the confines of Afghanistan, they still face a severe landmine threat as many bordering nations are also littered with landmines. Several of these refugees, particularly in Pakistan, have crossed over through unmonitored regions in order to avoid Taliban and Pakistani officials. As a result, they are hiding in the mountains along the border, which are heavily congested with unmarked landmines. Afghanistan already consists of the world's largest refugee population and it is anticipated that these numbers will grow, as conditions become more severe. Relief workers are expecting an initial influx of 300,000 refugees entering Pakistan and 80, 000 entering Iran.

Refugee organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Human Survival and Development (HSD), which are setting up refugee camps along the Pakistani border, recognize the urgent need for mine awareness and emergency assistance in these camps. As a result, organizations like the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), OMAR and CARE have refocused their efforts to prepare basic mine awareness and victim assistance operations in the refugee camps. Save the Children and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) are also developing programs geared towards educating children and providing safe areas for them to play.

According to MAG director Steve Priestley, the Afghani people already know about the landmine threat, they just need to be shown where to search for food, water and firewood, where they can bathe and where they can gather socially. MAG has been working with HSD since 1999 to assess the landmine problem in certain Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan where most refugee camps will be set up (for more information on the landmine situation in FATA, please refer to "[Pakistan: The Landmine Problem in Federally Administered Tribal Areas](#)" in issue 5.1 of *The Journal*). Currently, HSD consists of four mine awareness officers, one team leader and one medic, which is not nearly enough to assist the 10 camps they plan to establish (each housing up to 20,000 refugees). As a result, MAG officials hope to train village elders or other representatives to teach mine awareness in each community. These programs will be implemented as soon as funding becomes available.

Soldiers

Civilians are not the only ones threatened by landmines; hidden landmines are also one of the strongest defenses against American soldiers who may enter into Afghani territory. The extreme presence of landmines in the area makes it difficult to bring troops in and move them around. In some ways, these soldiers are more at risk than the Afghani people because they are not familiar with the land or the landmine situation. In addition, most of the Vietnam veterans and other soldiers, who are accustomed to clearing mines and treating mine injuries, have already retired.

On the other hand, current ground troops have been trained in traditional minesweeping techniques and should be able to control the problem as long as they do not attempt a head-on invasion of the country. Additionally, the army

has equipped its soldiers with a wide range of equipment to cope with the landmine threat and more supplies can be provided if necessary. Even so, the landmine threat will severely hinder the soldier's defensive abilities. If they are attacked, they will be unable to retaliate quickly and confidently since they have to carefully monitor each step.

Mine Action Personnel

Despite the urgent need to clear these landmines, most international supervisors, who would usually monitor clearance activities, have left the area, and Mine Action Programs in Afghanistan (MAPA) have been halted as a result of various conditions that hinder the staff's safety. First, communication has been cut off for all U.N. officials and in major cities like Kandahar, Herat, Jalabad and Kabul. Second, all flights have been suspended in Afghanistan, which are needed to assist deminers injured in the field. Third, as long as there is a state of war in Afghanistan, insurance companies will not cover demining fatalities. Finally, many demining camps resemble military camps putting them at risk for potential air strikes. As soon as these conditions improve, all programs will be re-established.

Meanwhile, the situations for native workers who remain in the area continue to worsen. Taliban authorities have taken over many U.N. offices and have been targeting mine action personnel in their attacks. U.N. officials in Pakistan have received several reports of Taliban groups breaking into offices, beating mine action staff and stealing valuable communication equipment, emergency vehicles and other supplies. OMAR director Fazel Karim Fazel reports the loss of six vehicles, four codan radios, two computers, two printers, ten mine detectors, five tables, five chairs and various other office supplies. This was the result of Taliban attacks on two offices in Mazar-e-Sharif on October 16th and Kandahar on October 17th. Authorities also hijacked 20 MDC vehicles in Kandahar, and several MDC workers have been threatened and beaten in Jalabad and Kabul. All mine dogs have been placed in kennels and are presumed safe, according to MDC director, Mohammad Shohab Hakimi.



Afghans load food supplies from the World Food Program and U.S. AID onto a bicycle in Kabul, Afghanistan. c/o AP

UNHCR has also reported attacks on mine action NGOs in Kabul on October 7th and in Jalabad on October 9th. In both instances, Taliban authorities attacked the security guards, tying one to a chair and beating him, but no equipment was stolen and little damage was found. However, officials stole seven pickup trucks, six cargo trucks and seven ambulances on October 9th. According to reports from mine action workers who fled the country after the attacks, members of the Taliban have been demanding vehicles and communication supplies and threatening anyone who does not comply.

Perhaps the hardest blow to mine action organizations was the loss of four U.N. security guards at Afghan Technical Consultants (ATC), one of Afghanistan's largest demining organizations. The security guards remained in the area to protect \$200,000 (U.S.) worth of demining equipment. They were sleeping in the office when a stray missile struck the building. Four other workers were also injured in the process. Even though this was an extreme tragedy for ATC, they plan to resume operations as soon as possible.

U.N. agencies in Pakistan have also been affected by the recent events. Angry protesters calling for a *jihad* (holy war) torched a UNICEF building in Quetta and stoned various other offices, including a UNHCR building across the street. Rioters also demonstrated outside buildings in Peshawar and other border cities. Fortunately, U.N. officials anticipated these events and had ordered all staff to stay home for the day so no workers were present when the attacks occurred.

However, further developments in refugee assistance programs were halted for a few days until security in all U.N. offices could be increased.

In addition to the increased danger caused by recent events, mine action personnel are also encountering new munitions like the cluster bomb that they are unprepared to handle. These bomblets, which can explode with the slightest touch, are a similar color as the relief packages being dropped in Afghanistan, making them an even greater risk. Civilians have been warned to approach packages with caution and to make sure they are square and not tin-can shaped.

When mine-clearers were called to dispose of a number of unexploded cluster bombs in a village outside of Herat, they had to surround them with sandbags and evacuate the area until they could learn more about the artillery. As a result, the United Nations is making plans to remove 4,000 mine action personnel from the country in order to prepare them for these new hazards.

Conclusion

Despite these intense setbacks, the mine action personnel in Afghanistan remain dedicated to their professions. While waiting for safety to be restored, ATC, HALO TRUST, OMAR, MDC, the Mine Clearance Planning Agency (MCPA) and other organizations working in the area continue to prepare their workers for post-conflict efforts. The Adopt-A-Minefield Campaign has suspended its program in Afghanistan but urges contributors to support MAG and other agencies focused on relief efforts for displaced civilians in Afghanistan and refugee camps in Pakistan.

While assisting refugee agencies in Pakistan and other bordering countries, MAG, OMAR, CARE and other NGOs are also forming plans to assist relief workers bringing supplies into Afghanistan as soon as conditions allow. A massive influx of refugees, similar to the one that occurred after the Kosovo conflict, is anticipated as this dispute resolves. In this event, relief agencies will require manual and mine dog assistance to clear pathways and distribution sites. At this time, personnel will return once again to helping the Afghan community re-establish their homes and lives.

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