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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 their efforts to secure their borders. This could result in the creation of the largest mine field the world has ever seen.

**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. Parkash Singh, an Indian Parliamentarian, recently warned that the world’s largest mine field could stretch up to three miles along the entire 700-kilometer border.

**History of Conflicts**

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 discretion of Kashmir’s king. After the king’s abdication in 1949, Pakistan claimed Kashmir as part of its territory.

**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 massive mine field. Experts cited by the Times 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 single. The Indian army has recently acknowledged that they have laid mines in such a manner. Some areas are likely to remain mine-free while soldiers litter strategic areas with mines, creating 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 Pakistani areas of rule in Kashmir—contains up to 5,000 landmines. 3 Such figures cannot be accurately extrapolated, but if these numbers even remotely approximate the situation along the rest of the LoC, this region represents the latest, largest challenge for the humanitarian demining community.

**Citizens and Landmines**

We have never used landmines in any civilian areas. Landmines are solely used for defensive military purposes, 4 claimed B.S. Sarita, second secretary at the High Commission of India, in the Times National Post. 5 We have to define our borders, and landmines are a very cost-effective way to do this, she 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 purposed to protect, according to a governmental claims notwithstanding.

Citizens are always the unintentional victims of landmines, the unavoidable collateral damage resulting in civilian casualties and in newspaper articles. Respectable governments strive to reduce the number of civilian impacts, but battlefields and farmers’ fields intersect all too often. A recent article in the Christian Science Monitor indicates an interview with a former Pakistani soldier who had laid mines along a single 12-km stretch along the Line of Control (LoC) from the Pakistani border.

We cannot stay in our houses, as the fear of a mine is always looming overhead, he said. We cannot visit our farms, as landmines have been laid there. Where shall we go? he queried. Singh is not alone. The intensified fighting has displaced more than 700,000 Pakistanis from their homes in the past months, many of whom must wander through newly-mined fields while searching for a place to rest. 6 Citizens of border villages have reported mine blasts almost daily, often triggered by returning refugees who are unaware of recently laid mines.

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 arsenal of conventional weapons. Both nations 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 strategists to re-plan invading forces and giving the defensive military time to react without overreacting.

Rakesh Sood, an Indian ambassador, outlined India’s goals for laying the mine fields, saying they would provide a "substantive system" and a "psychological barrier" to any invading force. In these countries’ and many others’ military doctrines, landmines serve a legitimate, necessary and non-replicable function, however detrimental they may be to society. These "blessings" to landmines apply only when militaries use landmines in a responsible manner. This would include marking all mine fields, notifying appropriate civilian authorities of every mine field location, and promptly removing all mines once they have served their purpose. Both armies appear to be falling 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 90 Indians civilians and soldiers were killed, were killed along the LoC by Indian-launched mines. In response, the Indian army launched an inquiry to determine if soldiers had followed accepted doctrine while laying the mines. When a country’s own defensive mines are blowing up its own 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 recorded the location of every single mine. Then, when the time comes, the same soldiers who implanted the mines evacuate them. Unfortunately, the time never comes for many mine fields. Some fields are policed 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. 7 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 potentially litter thousands of miles along the entire Pakistan-Indian border, creating a mine field stretching from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. Both governments insist that they are minimizing the impact on civilians by following standard marking and reporting procedures, but reports from the border area 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.

**References**

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4. "Threat 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 strategists to re-plan invading forces and giving the defensive military time to react without overreacting.
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