A War Far From Over: Iraq’s Landmine Struggle

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A War Far From Over:
Iraq’s Landmine Struggle

With the end of major hostilities, there comes an urgent need for UXO/mine clearance teams to start tackling their onerous task. A number of countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have begun to take on this responsibility, hoping to eliminate fear and restore a sense of security to the newly freed Iraqi people.

by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

From Bad to Worse: The Effects of Another War

The landmine crisis in Iraq was serious enough before the recent conflict, and additional fighting has only exacerbated the situation. Saddam Hussein planted thousands of mines around the key northern city of Kirkuk, as well as on main roads. Iraqi troops also mined stretches of the southern Persian Gulf in order to block out Allied ships and in many cases left mines behind when they retreated from key areas, often near important locations such as wells, oil fields and important roadways. Additionally, some of the cluster bombs that the Coalition Forces used did not explode and present a great danger because curious children often play with them and people try to take them apart for the value of the metal.

Despite these ever-present dangers, mines and cluster bombs are not the biggest immediate peril for the population. According to Roger Hess, a mine action professional who is currently in Iraq, the primary threat (particularly south of Baghdad) “is the massive amounts of ammunition stockpiles, weapons systems and missile sites that were intentionally placed inside the cities and civilian housing areas by the Saddam Hussein regime.” Looting has caused these stockpiles to be exposed and mined to death, and many of these weapons are unstable. According to the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), while adult males and boys are most at risk of injury from such weapons, stockpiles and munitions caches are a serious threat to the population as a whole, and the most serious one at present. Iraqi troops left ammunition stockpiles behind them in all kinds of locations, including civilian homes, schools and mosques.

The Long Road to Recovery

With all of the war remnants the Iraqi people have to live with, there is a great need for assistance in clearing them. A number of governments and organizations have offered their services in helping contain and eradicate the mine/UXO problem in Iraq. Several governments and NGOs have already begun their clearance activities.

QRFD

In April 2003, the U.S. Department of State’s Quick Reaction Demining Force (QRFD), a team designed for short-term rapid response to emergency demining situations, deployed to Iraq from its base in Mozambique at the request of the U.S. Department of State (DOS), Office of Humanitarian Demining Programe (HDPR). Within three days of its arrival, the QRFD quickly began battlefield area clearance (BAC) and demining tasks in and around the capital of Baghdad. In slightly more than three months, the four 10-man teams of manual deminers and eight mine detection dogs (MDD) have cleared approximately one million square meters of minefields found and destroyed almost 2,000 mines and other items of UXO.

During June, the QRFD conducted clearance operations at two separate locations in Iraq. Two manual clearance teams, with the aid of four MDD teams, worked on two minefields 98 km south of Baghdad along the main highway from Basra to the capital. Clearance operations on one of these minefields, which was the first one to be cleared in post-war Iraq, was completed during the month. QRFD teams found 280 Indian-manufactured AP mines in this minefield, most of which had been previously planted and later lifted and replaced by the Iraqi Army. Prior to the completed clearance of this minefield, two other manual clearance teams, also complemented with four MDD teams, cleared contamination of UXO and cluster munitions in and around Baghdad. These BAC tasks were started shortly after the deployment of the QRFD but quickly grew in size as local farmers made requests to the local command post to have their own fields cleared. In addition to these tasks, the QRFD has also cleared areas around the Iraqi electrical office in Baghdad to enable the repair of two power pylons and around the highway department’s housing and office compound. Clearance operations will continue in Baghdad during July.

UNMAS

The United Nations Mine Action Service is in charge of coordinating all of the United Nations’ emergency humanitarian response mine action activities. Through the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), UNMAS has established the Mine Action Coordinating Team (MACT), which coordinates UN activities for the recently established UN Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator Iraq (UNOCHI). The MACT is leading the development and implementation of the emergency response UN Mine Action Operations Plan for Iraq. At the time of writing, the MACT was conducting explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) activities with assistance from the Joint Force EOD Center. In addition to these efforts, the MACT is in charge of maintaining the country’s Information Management System (IMS), a Mine Action (IMMSA) database; developing and upholding mine action standards for current operations; and providing accreditation, quality assurance and priority setting.

MineTech

MineTech International teams arrived in Basra in late May and has been conducting EOD tasks in that area. Working under UN auspices, MineTech is fulfilling its duties as part of the UN Rapid Response Mine Action Contract. In July, they began conducting a Rapid Assessment Survey in the governorate of Erbil in the region of Duhok. Their staff includes about 90 EOD and mine clearance experts, MDDs with handling teams and emergency survey capabilities. These resources are sufficient enough to carry out their operations for three to six months.

UNOPS

UNOPS, working under the auspices of UNOCHI, has contracted several local NGOs to conduct mine clearance operations for its Mine Action Program (MAP). UNOPS funded manual mine clearance teams (MCTs) engaged in demining activities such as reconnaissance, recovery and destruction in several parts of the country. As of the end of June, the MCTs had completed mine clearance tasks in five minefields in the governorate of Erbil. At that time, demining activities were underway in 57 minefields in the three norther
MAG has been conducting operations in Iraq since the early 1990s and has continued to do so during the recent conflict. Now that the war has ended, MAG continues to carry out emergency operations in northern Iraq and is working to expand its services to areas in the south of the country. In the north, Mine Action Teams (MATs) and EOD squads are performing clearance tasks in all seven governorates. These activities are based in Kirkuk and Mosul. In southern Iraq, MAG has established a base in Basra.

In mid-June, four Survey Teams began surveys in all areas of northern Iraq. In one week alone, they identified 99 clearance tasks. At this time, seven EOD teams were working in Kirkuk and eight were working in and around Mosul. During the week ending June 20th, MAG teams were able to return over 500,000 sq m of land to the local population of Sulaymaniah governorate. Furthermore, UNOPS Survey Teams have been conducting Landmine Impact Survey (LIS) activities in the five-km zone that borders Iran, an area in which the government of Iraq had previously not authorized the UNOPS MAP to work.

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) has announced it will implement a humanitarian mine action program in Iraq over the next three years. The DOS's plans include establishing an Emergency Mine Action Team (EMAT), which will train Iraqi staff and provide them with equipment and supplies. This will lead to an indigenous mine action capacity within Iraq. Additionally, the DOS is helping MAG expand its efforts.

MAG is conducting re-connaissance and assessment operations in support of the World Food Program (WFP). The Swiss Demining Foundation (FSD) is conducting reconnaissance and assessment operations in support of the World Food Program (WFP). This fast, FSD personnel have searched a warehouse in AI Hills, where they found three cluster bombs. Also, they have conducted surveys in dangerous areas and provided UNMAS, Handicap International and NPA. During these surveys, the group found over 200 pieces of UXO.

The Danish Church Aid (DCA) is conducting mine clearance operations in southern Iraq, specifically around Basra. Assessments continue to be carried out in April and early May, and DCA teams identified five main task categories for the region:

1. Artillery perimeter storage and dumping sites
2. Essential battle areas, minefields and strike areas
3. Non-military battle areas, minefields and strike areas
4. Damaged or abandoned weapon systems, etc.
5. National capacity building

In accordance with the priorities set by the UN Mine Action Plan for Iraq, DCA is focusing on conducting surveys and assessments for categories 2 and 3 from the above list. The DCA teams began performing advanced disposal operations at the end of May and plan to continue these operations through July. Plans for June include conducting priority tasks in Basra, initiating capacity building at the civilian defense structure, cooperating closely with other organizations and requiring a program to document effort as well. InterMOS, a non-profit humanitarian organization, has a standby capacity of equipment for clearing cluster bomb heads that it has discussed contributing as well. The NGO Norwegian Peoples' Aid (NPA) plans to transition from its pre-war clearance efforts in northern Iraq to post-war emergency assistance following Baghdad, including two EOD teams, four MDOs, one field and five Emergency Response Teams. In addition to these organizations, a number of countries have plans to send troops and EOD teams to Iraq as well. So far, the list includes New Zealand, the UK, the Ukraine, Norway, El Salvador, Slovakia, Moldova and Nicaragua.

**References**


**Conclusion**

Even before the war, the UN Secretary General estimated that clearing Iraq's minefields could take "anywhere from 35 to 75 years." With the added effects of the recent conflict, the task of ridding Iraq of mines and UXO is a daunting one.

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