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Mine Awareness in Iraq

Following the U.S.-led war in Iraq, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are saving lives by doing what they can to raise awareness about the country's serious landmine/UXO problem.

by Kristina Davis, MAIC

Introduction

Due to the massive amounts of mines and UXO littering post-war Iraq, the country has arguably become one of the most dangerous places in the world. The main problem areas are around Iraq's borders and military bases, where unfortunately, many local villages are located as well. Many organizations are well aware of the landmine problems facing the Iraqi civilians and are currently implementing thorough mine education programs throughout the region.

Mine Awareness Programs

Handicap International (HI)

While it is difficult to ascertain exact numbers of landmine victims, the HI team reports landmine and UXO accidents occur at the rate of "several times a day in Baghdad and more than a dozen a day in the rest of the country." Hoping to spread awareness, HI has collaborated with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to print at least 200,000 leaflets as their first step in educating the Iraqi community about the dangers of landmines. In order to present the messages in a way that would be understood by all, the images were tested on a sample of the Iraqi refugees currently in Jordan—coming from different regions of Iraq and Kurdistan and composed of men, women and children, both Muslim and Christian. Two main areas have been targeted for distribution thus far: northern Iraq, in collaboration with the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), and southern Iraq, in collaboration with UNICEF in Lamako. Baghdad will also be targeted with 100,000 leaflets for distribution as certain areas of the city are also polluted with mines and UXO. HI will use the community network, including mosques, the Red Crescent Society and women's organizations to facilitate their mine risk education (MRE) programs. Posters, seminars and radio and television messages will be used in coordination with the leaflets in order to successfully reach the largest number of people.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The ICRC has been working in Iraq since the Iran-Iraq war began in 1980. The ICRC's mine awareness programs utilize the three pillars of the community-based awareness concept: information collection, community involvement and integration with other programs. In the Middle East, the ICRC is starting up an emergency program with five awareness delegations based in the countries surrounding Iraq. The main aim is to reach the civilian population as quickly as possible with safety messages in order to avoid any unnecessary accidents. Posters, pamphlets, material and radio spots will be individually designed for appropriate target groups.

MAG

The Data Coordination Unit (DCU) of MAG has a database that holds records of more than 3,782 minefields in the most heavily contaminated areas of Iraq. MAG's mine awareness program seeks to minimize the risk of mine exposure among local populations by implementing diverse programs suited to many different types of people. From 1997 to June 2003, MAG trained over 3,000 teachers and school supervisors and was the first NGO to implement "child-to-child" techniques to mine action, including MRE. In addition to dealing with major shortages in food, medical and medical care, NGOs are working hard to continue the provision of aid amidst political instability and civil turmoil. Looters and criminal gangs frequently destroy distance delivery essential supplies to hospitals and civilians in various parts of the country. The following is a short description of what some established NGOs and the United Nations are doing to help victims in Iraq.

UNOPS Mine Action Program

UNOPS has managed the northern Iraqi Mine Action Program continued on page 88

Victim Assistance in Iraq

Large numbers of UXO and mines left behind from the continuing conflict in Iraq have resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of victims. This article was written while the coalition forces were still engaged in conventional combat prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein.

by Kimberly Kim, MAIC

Toward the end of 2002, civilian landmine casualty rates in Iraq were believed to be about 32 per month. Since conflict began in March of 2003, however, no one knows for certain exactly how many Iraqi civilians have been injured or killed. "The number of civilian victims is very high but cannot be calculated," states Beatrice Camillieri of Handicap International (HI) during the first few weeks of conflict, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported that over 800,000 Iraqis had fled cities due to conflict and the ICRC is starting up an emergency program with five awareness delegations based in the countries surrounding Iraq. The main aim is to reach the civilian population as quickly as possible with safety messages in order to avoid any unnecessary accidents. Posters, pamphlets, material and radio spots will be individually designed for appropriate target groups.

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operations in both the north and south of the country, while coordination with military and civil bodies has been strong and beneficial. MAG is still the only mineaction agency fully operational in former G0V-held areas of Iraq and will continue to increase its area of work into central Iraq as security allows.

Mine Awareness, continued from page 80

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(MAP) since 1997. UNOPS was able to expedite and fine-tune mine awareness programs by developing a mine action database by the year 2000. Between December 2000 and June 2002, the MAP provided mine awareness education to over 143,000 beneficiaries. Meanwhile, UNICEF has launched an impressive MRE campaign in Iraq as well. In an effort to further target children, UNICEF has hired television campaigns to be sure children are educated and aware of the dangers they face. UNICEF is trying to get the Iraqi children back in school as quickly as possible in order to both increase MRE and to keep them off the streets and away from danger. UNICEF is the lead agency for MRE within the UN system.

Conclusion

The work these mine action organizations have completed thus far has already made vast improvements on the quality of life many Iraqis witness today. While much work remains to be done in order to build adequate infrastructure for everyday living, the long road ahead is becoming easier to navigate as these organizations figure out new and more comprehensive ways to teach mine awareness.

References

2. For more information, see the ICRC's website at http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/information/scene/irap/irap.documents.

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A distraught mother comforts her son, who was injured while handling UXO.

Putting Sea Mammals to Work: Dolphins Help Coalition Forces in Iraq

In the first month after arriving in Iraq, the dolphin teams achieved a number of successes, including unofficial clearance of 913 nautical miles of water, investigation of 237 objects, and recovery and/or destruction of over 100 mines.

by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

Iraqi forces laid sea mines in Umm Qasr, Iraq's only deep-water port, as they withdrew from the area in late March. Thus, before humanitarian aid ships could enter, the area had to be cleared of sea mines. This mission marked the first time the NMMP dolphins were used in a combat environment. Military personnel from the United States, Australia and Britain—including 50 divers with sophisticated underwater equipment—spent four days clearing the port with the help of the dolphin teams.

Several dolphins in all helped out in the region: Tacoma and Makai arrived first, and they were later joined by Jefe and Kahili, two males, and Kona and Punani, both females. In more hours, the team had cleared a path for the Sir Galahad, a humanitarian aid ship. After clearing a 50-mile shipping lane in the port, the teams began clearing hazardous explosives from a wider area. The dolphin teams were also being employed to help clear the Khawr Abdullah waterway, which connects Umm Qasr to the Gulf.

The dolphins were well taken care of during their deployment; veterinarians and handlers monitored their health carefully. The group in Iraq adapted fairly well, probably because the Gulf is similar to their normal environment. One dolphin, Tacoma, left the area for about 48 hours, and some were worried he was gone for good. He did return, however; as their trainer, Aviation Ordnanceman First Class Dee Jennings, says, "They take day trips. They're not missing. We do have tracking devices on them, but we don't worry about it. They always come home."

A dolphin watches K-Dog, a bottle nose dolphin attached to Commander Task Unit 55.4.3.}

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