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Demining Efforts in Namibia

Previous mine clearance programs in Namibia started the country on a clear path towards demining success. Unfortunately, a current lack of funding and a spillover of the longstanding conflict in Angola have thwarted progress.

Overview of the Situation

Support ed by the governments of Namibia and Angola, the United Nations created the African troop-clearance mission in the northern regions of Namibia in 1994. Before Namibia gained its independence from South Africa and the SADF properly marked, mapped and fenced in these minefields.1

First Phase of Mine Clearance

With the implementation of United Nations Resolution 435 in 1989, South African troops conducted the first mine clearance project in Namibia. The process they used involved driving heavy battle tanks pulling grid rollers across designated minefields and bases to clear the areas. However, out of the 44,594 landmines laid, only 98,779 were neutralized and 96 detonated. Over 2,479 mines were left unaccounted for.2 Therefore, the first demining project concluded with only a 92 percent success rate. Even with the first phase of mine clearance completed, the country still had major demining problems.

Second Phase of Mine Clearance

At the start of the second phase of mine clearance, local companies were hired to conduct the removal process. Namibia Blasting Agents gained a contract to clear all known minefields surrounding former military bases by the Namibia Blasting Agents.3 The resolution intended to give the NDF the explicit orders to clear all known minefields and AT mines, and told the Explosives Unit of the Namibian police to remove and destroy all military ordnance and UXO across the former war zone. Unfortunately, both the NDF and the Explosives Unit lacked the sufficient number of clearance experts and equipment necessary to successfully complete the project.

Government Involvement

As the second phase of the demining process was concluding, the Namibian government assured the responsibility of all mine clearance and mine awareness programs. On May 19, 1992, a Namibia Cabinet resolution halted a second contract for the clearance of minefields surrounding former military bases by Namibia Blasting Agents.4 The resolution instead gave the NDF the explicit orders to clear all known minefields and UXO, and the Explosives Unit of the Namibian police to remove and destroy all military ordnance and UXO. However, many Namibian government forces - Forcas Armadas Angolanas (FAA) - across the northern border. In 1999, Namibia granted the FAA the use of NDF military bases along the border for the purpose of defensive attacks against UNETA forces in southern eastern Angola.5 However, the FAA has also used these bases for the stockpile and transportation of ammunition.

Current Status

Although demining efforts increased with U.S. involvement, the current number of casualties has recently risen in the northern regions of Namibia, most notably in the regions of Kavango and Caprivi. In 1997, landmine casualties were listed as one killed and 10 injured for the year.6 But during the following year, these numbers increased to three killed and 22 injured and police reports from 2000 indicate 14 killed and 125 injured from landmines.7 In addition to an increase in the number of casualties, the types of incidents responsible for landmine civilian casualties have changed significantly.

References

1. Colonel J.T. Thyes, The Namibian Experience. 2. Ibid. 3. Ibid. 4. Ibid. 5. Ibid. 6. Ibid. 7. Ibid.

Conclusion

A major problem still exists in Namibia. UXO and recently placed AP mines from the Angolan conflict continue to take innocent lives. The NDF and Explosives Unit lack the adequate personnel, budget and technology necessary to eradicate the problem. Mine awareness campaigns, although very effective, fail to reach the remote, far-flung, and destitute population who need it the most. Inconsistent maps and minefield reports make it nearly impossible to locate landmines accurately. The once seemingly simple landmine problem in Namibia has again been complicated. The Namibian government needs additional support to once again become a "model to Africa and the world."