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Burundi

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by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

History

A monarchy ruled Burundi from the 17th century until it was overthrown in 1966. After this overthrow, the First Republic went into effect, a tumultuous time marked by the 1972 genocide of the Hutu community. In 1976, the First Republic government was overthrown, leading to the Second Republic, headed by Jean Paptiste Bagaza. In 1987, Pierre Buyoya overthrew him and created the Third Republic. Despite Buyoya's efforts to bring peace and unity to the country, violence similar to that of 1972 erupted in 1988 between the Hutu and the Tutsi. Since 1993, Burundi's ethnic-based conflicts have reportedly claimed over 150,000 casualties. Genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the Zaire uprising in 1997 intensified the situation in Burundi due to the significant population relocation from both of these neighboring countries. Because of these conflicts, weapons could also be transported readily, and considerable quantities of weapons—including landmines seized from the former Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR)—became easier to obtain.



Landmines/UXO Overview

The first landmine accidents were reported in 1993, but there was no knowledge of a significant mine problem in Burundi until 1996. In those three years, the problem intensified, most likely due to the deteriorating state of security and the population overflows created by the circumstances in Zaire and Rwanda. The FAR allegedly brought 40,000 AP mines and 2,000 AT mines with them when they fled their country, greatly exacerbating the situation.

According to the Ministry of Defense, "there are no mined areas that could be identified as such," even with the numerous conflicts that have occurred in Burundi. However, the Landmine Monitor reports, "It seems certain that anti-personnel mines have been used in the ongoing conflict in Burundi." It is probable that Burundian forces laid AP mines on the border with Tanzania since at least 1999. They also apparently used landmines to prevent rebels from entering government territory, gaining access to military posts, damaging important economic infrastructures and crossing the Tanzanian border. Additionally, mines have been found along short cuts rather than main roads, suggesting that the army was trying to disable rebels along the paths they commonly use. Despite

this evidence and allegations by rebels, the government emphatically denies any use of mines, laying blame entirely on rebel forces.

Casualties

In total, between 1993 and 1998, mines claimed 487 civilian lives and 304 military lives. This number peaked in 1997 and declined the following year. Injuries up to 1998 totaled 187 (92 of them military personnel and 95 of them civilians). Reports also suggest that rebel forces sometimes fall victim to their own traps, and many of these incidents go unreported. In December 2000, one aid worker reported that accidents along the Tanzanian border occurred at a rate of two per month. The National Army has provided military landmine victims with prostheses and vocational training, but these services are only available to the military. Other survivors often take refuge in camps just inside the Tanzanian border, but the areas surrounding such refugee camps are reportedly mined as well.

Demining

Because the Ministry of Defense does not consider the mine issue a significant problem in Burundi, the government has no demining or awareness programs. The military provides the only coordinated mine clearance efforts for the country. No assessment has yet been made of the scope of Burundi's mine problem or its estimated cost. The Ministry of Defense has indicated that the country is in desperate need of proper detection equipment and that they have no capacity for mechanical mine clearance.

Reality Check

Burundi signed the Ottawa Convention on December 3, 1997, but the country has not yet ratified the treaty. As of January 2001, the ratification process was proceeding on schedule, and one official said, "The only problem that prevails is the persistence of war." Burundi is not known to have manufactured or exported AP mines, and according to the Ministry of Defense, the government has never bought them except for training purposes.

Although the government has not established a mine awareness program, UNICEF established an emergency program in April of 2001 for displaced persons. By working with the Department of Civil Protection, UNICEF plans to help the Burundi government develop its technical capacity so that it can implement mine awareness programs in mine-affected areas. They will also help the government set up a national victim surveillance network, including a central database in the capital city of Bujumbura.

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