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European Languages

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## Deadly Mines Still Take Toll in Afghanistan

By Abdol Wahed Faramarz

08/14/2011

**Despite clearance efforts, forgotten landmines cause 50 casualties a month.**



Sitting in the shade of a tree in the Kabul children's hospital, Karimullah recalls the exact moment his young son was injured in a mine blast.

Two weeks earlier, the boy was playing with other children in their village in the Qara Bagh district of Ghazni province, south of the Afghan capital, when Karimullah heard a loud explosion and rushed to the scene.

“When we got there, four children were dead and ten others were injured, including my son,” Karimullah said. His son’s injuries were so serious that he had to come to the capital for treatment.

“The mine was left over from the civil war [1992-96] period,” he said, adding that despite several similar explosions in the area, local officials had done little to address the menace.

Afghanistan’s landmine legacy dates from 1979 and the arrival of Soviet forces. They and the Afghan government they were supporting are believed to have planted most of the mines planted since then, although their mujahedin opponents also used them.

Defence ministry spokesman General Zaher Azimi said the Soviet-backed government of the 1980s mined many areas, particularly around military camps and checkpoints.

Landmines were also planted in the civil war that followed, so that Afghanistan became one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. Minefields were left unmarked and forgotten, anti-personnel and anti-tank mines were dug up and moved for reuse in new conflicts, while those dropped from the air were scattered randomly. A significant threat continues to be posed by unexploded shells and other detritus from past wars.

In the current conflict, the Taleban have been accused of planting landmines, as well as making widespread use of improvised roadside bombs which pose a lasting threat if they do not go off.

“In wartime, the hostile parties always plant mines as a tactic of during fighting,” Azimi said. “In addition to the destruction they cause, it takes a long time to clear them, and that [delayed threat] is also used as a military tactic.”

Dayem Kakar, the head of Afghanistan’s Natural Disaster Management Authority, whose remit includes landmine clearance, says one million people have been killed or disabled by the hidden weapons over the past three decades of war, and almost three million are still at risk from living near minefields.

Mohammed Haidar Reza, head of the United Nations’ Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan, said that although the number of casualties had fallen over the years, there was no prospect of the landmine threat being eliminated in the foreseeable future.

Whereas in 1989-90, some 500 to 600 people were being injured by mine blasts every month, this number had fallen to 170 by 2000, and at the moment averages 52 a month, according to Reza. Six out of ten casualties are children.

The fall in casualty numbers is a result of demining efforts, which picked up after the Taleban administration was ousted in late 2001.

Although Kakar said mine clearance work had been hampered by insufficient funding, Reza said 700 million US dollars had been spent on removing mines to date, with major donors including the UN, the United States, Germany, Japan, Canada and the United Arab Emirates.

Eleven mine clearance agencies, five of them commercial, currently operate in Afghanistan, with some 14,000 employees.

Mohammad Shahab Hakimi, director of the Mine Detection Dog Centre, set up by the UN after the Soviet troop withdrawal in 1989, said two million mines had been defused so far, rendering 70 per cent of the 16,000 known minefields harmless. That left one to two million left to clear in the remaining 30 per cent of identified minefields, which are mainly located in southern and eastern areas where the security situation is poor.

Hakimi said clearing these remaining areas was likely to take another three to six years.

“In some parts of the country, we’re unable to clear minefields because of warfare or lack of security,” he said. “In addition, mines have been re-planted in areas that have already been cleared.”

Hakimi noted that 1,200 mine clearance workers had suffered death or injury while carrying out their hazardous work.

Afghanistan signed the international convention banning the production and use of mines in 2003, and another prohibiting cluster mines in 2008.

Azimi said the current government had not planted mines anywhere in the country, and accused the Taliban of planting new landmines as well as roadside bombs, which together accounted for 80 per cent of military and civilian casualties.

“The Taliban aren’t capable of fighting the national and foreign forces face to face, so they plant mines to protect themselves,” he said. “We have defused tens of thousands of mines in our operations in the Zherai and Panjwai districts [of Kandahar] and in Helmand’s Washir district.”

IWPR made several attempts to contact a Taliban spokesman, but was unable to get a response on the insurgents’ use of explosive devices.

In the end, though, the identity of those planting mines or the period from which they date is of little relevance to victims such as Zarghuna, 15.

The 15-year-old girl, from the Gerda Seray district of the southern Paktia province, was receiving treatment in Kabul after stepping on a mine and losing a leg while gathering animal fodder two days earlier.

Her father Gholam Faruq said that although he believed the mine had been planted recently, the area where it was laid was also the scene fighting between mujahedin and Soviet forces in the 1980s.

Her face and arms marked by shrapnel, Zarghuna said, “Those who planted the mine are my enemies.”