

Clearing Minefields

Albania and Greece are declared “landmine-free”

Among the toughest barriers to post-war reconciliation and reconstruction throughout much of Southeast Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia are the millions of landmines that have turned field and forest into no man’s land. Even as warfare has fled countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Albania and Azerbaijan, buried explosives in the ground, able to sever limbs and shorten lives, have disrupted attempts to bring these societies to full peacetime footing. In the case of Bosnia, close to 4 percent of its territory harbored hundreds of thousands of landmines as of early 2010, remnants of a war that ended 15 years earlier. Bosnia represents the worst-case scenario in the Balkans but is dwarfed by the problem in Afghanistan, where conflicts since the 1970s have left the landscape strewn with millions of explosives.

Fortunately, international teams with bomb-sniffing dogs, advanced robotics and modern metal detectors are achieving victories in the fight against abandoned landmines. Good news arrived in December 2009: Two European nations, Albania and Greece, announced at the Cartagena Summit on a Mine-Free World that their terrain was effectively “mine-free” following multimillion-dollar ordnance removal efforts. “The combined results of this nearly decade-long effort saw the return to safe use of over 16 million square meters of land and the destruction of over 12,500 mines and nearly 5,000 items of unexploded ordnance,” the U.S. State Department said of Albania in July 2010.

After coming into widespread use in the early 20th century, mines have become the chief post-war hazards in scores of countries. Hundreds of varieties exist, including tiny anti-personnel mines designed to injure, but not kill, passing Soldiers; “leaping” mines that scatter hundreds of bits of lethal shrapnel; and high explosive mines that target tanks and other vehicles. Most attention has focused on the direct human dimension, the estimated 10,000 civilians mines kill or injure each year. But the problem of “mine contamination” transcends lost lives and limbs, international aid organizations say.

“Mines destroy national infrastructures and impede economic development and reconstruction efforts.

REUTERS



An Afghan deminer in 2008 searches for unexploded ordnance.

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A mine clearing vehicle operated by Slovakian Soldiers clears a minefield at the ISAF's airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. The battalion has destroyed hundreds of mines in what is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world.



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Greek Soldiers search for landmines near the town of Soufli at the Greek-Turkish border in 2006. Greece recently announced it was “mine free” after a multiyear clearance effort.



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

An Afghan displays an anti-personnel mine, a variety terrorists had tried to smuggle into the capital of Kabul.

Transportation networks, power lines and water resources are damaged and inaccessible,” the Canadian Landmine Foundation noted. “The production and distribution of fundamental goods and services is disrupted. Tourism markets, an important source of income in many countries, suffer greatly. In addition, mine clearance programs divert financial resources from critical development and reconstruction projects.”

Afghan example

As a poor nation dependent on herding and crop cultivation, Afghanistan suffers disproportionately from the tens of thousands of unexploded mines littered across roads, irrigation ditches and pastures. A report by the U.N. Department of Humanitarian Affairs places the number of landmines in the country at close to 10 million, many left over from the Soviet era of the 1970s and 1980s. Twenty anti-mine organizations, employing more than 8,000 people, have worked in Afghanistan. One of them, the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan, partly financed through the U.N. Voluntary Trust Fund, has cleared close to 20,000 explosives so far. Even where landmines have been deemed a battlefield necessity, troops have stepped up use of degradable explosives that automatically deactivate after a designated number of months or years, reducing the need for later clearance.

Though less contaminated by landmines than Afghanistan, neighboring Tajikistan has been making progress in de-mining the country following its civil war in the 1990s. According to the U.N. Mine Action Service, Tajikistan has managed to open up three-quarters of its mine-affected land, a process that included the removal of 12,400 landmines. Tajik landmine casualties have decreased by half, the U.N. said. Efforts continue under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in

Europe and U.S. Central Command. Munitions experts from Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria and France have added their expertise. The U.N. has high hopes of duplicating Tajikistan’s relative success in Afghanistan. Its strategy calls for removing nearly every anti-personnel mine in Afghanistan by 2013.

Further progress

In what landmine clearance proponents dubbed a huge success, more than 120 countries were represented at the Cartagena landmine summit in late 2009. Though financial contributions to mine clearance vary, tens of millions of dollars are spent annually. In Azerbaijan, for example, donations helped purchase several remote-controlled “mini-flail” machines. They run on tank-like treads and use rotating flails to sift soil for mines. Azerbaijan’s mines stem mostly from its conflict with neighboring Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh from 1988 to 1994.

The largest financial contribution toward landmine clearance, about 1.5 billion euros since 1997, has come from European Union member states. The United States has contributed a similar amount over the years. Still, the U.N.’s Portfolio of Mine Action Projects for 2010 cites a “record shortfall” in financing 277 projects worldwide, costing \$589 million. The largest single request for aid came from Afghanistan.

“Some of the beneficiary countries included in the portfolio have well-advanced mine action programmes, while others have begun tackling landmines and explosive remnants of war only recently,” U.N. Under-Secretary-General Alain LeRoy wrote in the introduction to the 2010 portfolio. “Regardless of the stage of development, each of them requires sustained support from governments and donors alike, in order for all of us to move forward and succeed.” □