

Opening up Blue Nile

The scene of heavy fighting between rival forces during Sudan's civil war, Blue Nile State inherited numerous minefields planted by both sides during the conflict.

The mines have severely hindered local movement, blocking rain-fed agricultural lands, water sources, grazing grounds and commercial routes.

The UN Mine Action Office (UNMAO) began assessing the impact of mines and explosive remnants of war (ERWs) on the state in 2005 in collaboration with the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action.

By March 2007, a Landmine Impact Survey was completed, which noted that 33 communities in Blue Nile State were affected by mines and ERWs. Further surveys and mine action activity in the state revealed by July 2010 that 54 communities were affected, with 11 considered high priorities due to blockage and levels of danger.

"As of July 2010, Blue Nile State was faced with a known problem of 61 dangerous areas, 20 defined minefields and 28 suspected hazardous areas throughout 54 communities," said Armen Harutyunyan, UNMAO Regional Operations Coordinator for North Sudan.

But the figures represented only known problem areas, and his office was constantly discovering new ones, the coordinator added. "In the 2010-2011 demining season, we aim to clear all high priority hazards first before addressing the remaining medium and low priority ones."

Considered an important strategic site during the war, the Blue Nile State town of Kurmuk was surrounded by minefields laid dangerously close to its residents.

The process called "land release" was begun in Kurmuk in July 2006, with implementing partners collecting all existing documentation about the minefields as well as evidence of accidents at the location to better define the land to be cleared through demining procedures.

Land release focused on emergency humanitarian priorities like settlement areas and access to water. It continued with the survey and clearance of minefields surrounding the town.

Mechanical demining machines were used in six minefields defined through survey in early

2009. The machines shortened the work by at least two years, allowing over two and a half million square metres, or the equivalent of more than 300 football fields, to be released to local people.

"The inclusion of mechanical assets into Blue Nile State has had a great impact on the clearance rates," said Steve Davies, UNMAO Operations Officer in Blue Nile State. "We have been able to survey the fields more effectively and identify the high risk areas more quickly."

Now, recently built houses can be seen around Kurmuk on cleared land, and one area has actually become a football field.

The owner of one of these dwellings, Deng Malek, recently moved back to Kurmuk from the community of Keili, where his family had gone to live with relatives. "We were all crowded, did not have our own place. Then we found out that they cleared the mines in Kurmuk and we returned to our land."

"We are very grateful to UNMAO and its partners for the clearance activities in Kurmuk. Our people can now live in safety."

Mr. Malek has now finished building a second house on cleared land.

UNMAO and the National Mine Action Centre (NMAC) have cooperated in releasing this land. The Pakistani Demining Platoons and Ronco Consulting Ltd. have made it a reality, destroying over 7,000 anti-personnel mines, anti-tank mines and explosive ordnance devices.

The release of Kurmuk area land has helped open up farming, animal grazing and borderline commerce. With a new road linking the state capital of Ed Damazin to Kurmuk, home-building on cleared land occurs almost overnight.

"We are very grateful to UNMAO and its partners for the clearance activities in Kurmuk. Our people can now live in safety," said Acting Commissioner of Kurmuk locality Zakaria Mariat.

As areas like Challi still remain heavily affected by mines and ERWs, NMAC and UNMAO will continue to cooperate with mine action stakeholders in removing these hazards.

With Sudan gradually entering a developmental stage, UNMAO plans to change from an implementation role to one of support at the end of June 2011, with NMAC taking over the coordination of demining activities. ■

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Building houses on cleared land in Kurmuk. Photo: UNMAO/Steve Davies.

