Overview

Explosive remnants of war (ERW) and landmines
Syria Needs Analysis Project - August 2014

Since the 1990s, the Syria-Turkey border has been mined by the Government of Turkey (GoT). Turkey's borders with Bulgaria, Georgia and Greece have also been mined, although the GoT has reported that these borders have been cleared of mines. In addition, during the 1980s and 1990s conflict, both the GoT and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) laid mines in southeast Syria. In March 2013, the GoT had identified over 3,500 contaminated areas, with almost 20% of these mined areas located near military infrastructure, and a further 350 areas suspected to be contaminated. 90% of the identified contamination is located along the Syrian border. In 2003, the governments of Syria and Turkey reportedly agreed to demine the border between the two countries and in 2009, the GoT passed a law to demine its side of the border. Since the conflict erupted in Syria, these demining efforts have been halted. Turkey is also affected by ERW, particularly due to fighting near the Syria-Turkey border and in the southwest as a result of the conflict with the PKK. As of late 2012, the GoT had not identified contaminated areas.

Iraq

Iraq is one of the most landmine and ERW contaminated regions in the world, with an estimated 18 million mines laid during the Iran-Iraq war and an additional 4 million planted prior to the US-led invasions in 1991 and 2003. These US-led invasions also utilised cluster bombs extensively, leading to large-scaleétations primarily across southern Iraq, but also some in Kuwait and in the Kuwaiti Region of Iraq (KRI). According to the Iraqi government, the primary risks are posed to the development of Iraq’s oil fields, tourism, and agricultural sectors. However, casualties from ERW and landmines are likely underestimated. The KRI is also contaminated due to various conflicts and regional clashes. Several of the Syrian refugee camps, such as Domiz and Gawilan, were established on or near former military installations that were at risk of UXO contamination, before risk assessments had been conducted. Mine action groups cleaned and destroyed about 160,000 UXO from Domiz camp and 1,200 UXOs from the Baghdad Kandelia transit camp site, which receives all Syrian refugees permitted to enter the KRI. Due to ongoing contamination around the camps and the limited awareness among Syrian refugees, there are high risks of being affected by ERW and landmines. The latest conflict driven by the Islamic State and other Iraqi opposition groups in Anbar and northern Iraq are at risk of UXO contamination threats, according to trusted sources.

Recommendations

- Systematic documentation of incidents involving explosive weapons and mines should be compiled and shared throughout Syria, with the support of the Mine Action Service (MAS).
- The use of landmines was also reported along the Syria-Lebanon border, particularly in the Jisr Shughur and Teftnaz sub-districts.
- In all refugee hosting countries in the region, mine risk education should be strengthened throughout Syria, with increased information sharing with the UN Mine Action Service.
- The overall risk posed from residual ERW and mines is relatively high among refugee hosting countries in the region. Syria is particularly at high risk of being affected by ERW as the vast majority of the population is living in urban areas.
- The risk of Syrian refugees in Lebanon being affected by ERW and mines is relatively high among refugee host countries in the region due to the following factors: (1) Syria has a limited understanding of the general risks of ERW and mines compared to other countries, particularly in Idlib and Lattakia, where mines are located; and (2) compared to other refugee hosting countries in the region, Lebanon is very densely populated and all mean settlements host the most Syrian refugees. The high density creates increased competition for land and livelihoods and Syrians may be more willing to take higher risks to live, work or travel closer to known minefields.

Declaration - Information provided is provisional as it has not been possible to independently verify field reports. This report covers a highly dynamic subject and the information is as up to date as possible, given the information limitations.

Syria

The intensive use of explosive weapons across Syria, particularly in high population density urban areas, has been documented by human rights groups and the UN since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. Major cities and their suburbs, such as Aleppo, Damascus, Deir-e-Zor, Homs, Hama, and Ar-Raqqah are major hotspots, while rural areas of De’a, Hama and Lattakia governorates are also likely to be significantly contaminated. Although ERW and landmines have reportedly caused casualties in Homs, Hasakah, Ar-As-Suwar and Tafhan sub-districts, and also severely impeded humanitarian access. Some clearance activities have been undertaken by the Syrian Armed Forces and opposition actions but on an extremely limited and ad hoc basis. In 2011, a Syrian government report described that anti-personnel mines were widespread across landmines on the Syrian side of the border with Lebanon in order to curb the smuggling of UXO. Mortar contamination of high-density urban areas and information limitations throughout the conflict means that it will take decades of rigorous clearance efforts, as ERW are burned among rubble and debris. Beirut and Srinagar experienced similar ERW contamination in urban areas, the latter city required 8-9 years of clearance efforts, although explosive weapons were used at relatively lower levels compared to Syrian cities. Over time, ERW and landmines will also migrate due to flooding or erosion, particularly in soft, sandy soil, thereby further spreading the contamination risk.

Casualties 2008-2012

Syria

Lebanon

Jordan

Egypt

Casualties 2008-2012

Syria

Lebanon

Jordan

Egypt

Casualties 2008-2012

Syria

Lebanon

Jordan

Egypt


Prior to 2011, Syria experienced some ERW contamination, with high concentration of mines and ERW in the countryside and occupation areas. However, these areas were at risk of being contaminated by UXO contamination. Since the conflict, the risk of contamination from ERW and landmines has increased significantly due to both the high population density and the large-scale armed conflict. The risk of contamination from ERW and landmines is particularly high in rural areas, such as in the northern and eastern parts of Syria.

The risk of Syrian refugees in Lebanon being affected by ERW and mines is relatively high among refugee host countries in the region due to the following factors: (1) Syria has a limited understanding of the general risks of ERW and mines compared to other countries, particularly in Idlib and Lattakia, where mines are located; and (2) compared to other refugee hosting countries in the region, Lebanon is very densely populated and all mean settlements host the most Syrian refugees. The high density creates increased competition for land and livelihoods and Syrians may be more willing to take higher risks to live, work or travel closer to known minefields.

Sources

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