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Sudan: Demining Essential to Assure Safe Returns in the South

Since the historic signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan in January 2005, displaced people from the south have been returning to their home areas. A safe return home for the millions of displaced people in Sudan, however, is not guaranteed.

Land mines and other lethal remnants of the twenty-one-year war continue to kill and maim people, obstruct the delivery of humanitarian aid and hinder reconstruction and peace-building. Lack of resources and political will has hampered demining efforts. Sudanese authorities in both the Government of National Unity and the Government of South Sudan must prioritize mine clearance and related activities, while donor governments must ensure that they have adequate support to do so.

Both sides in the civil war used mines extensively. Figures are inexact pending in-depth country surveys underway, but south Sudan is estimated to have anywhere from 500,000 to two million mines. Anti-vehicle mines were used on the few passable roads and bridges to restrict access to towns, and anti-personnel landmines were placed in defensive belts to protect garrison towns, bridges and defensive positions on hilltops. Combatants also planted mines in or around health facilities, schools, local markets, and water sources. Now, as people begin to return home in the south, they encounter impassable roads and unusable agricultural land. There is very little information available to mark these dangers as over the years mines were often re-planted, some as often as three times, and many of the original maps of the minefields have been lost.

Particularly at risk are displaced Sudanese that return to heavily mined former garrison towns. They are intended to be transit areas for returnees but due to the slow pace of rural development and other factors, many of the displaced find themselves stuck in these towns. In Malakal, for example, the sudden influx of returnees has stretched the resources of the local people. "The area around this town is mined," said a local official in Canal, a small village on the outskirts of Malakal.

"The area cannot grow to accommodate these people." When Refugees International was in Malakal in March 2006, landmines killed three children.

Mine risk education for returnees is urgently needed. Some returnees have resorted to building houses inside the landmine rings in this cramped city. "I pulled a landmine out of someone's living room," a mine action officer in Malakal told RI. "The area wasn't adequately marked as a minefield and they had no idea." There have been reports of nearly 2,000 landmine-related accidents in south Sudan, although the actual number may be much higher. With the advent of the rainy season, the situation may become direr as the rain brings mines to the surface, increasing risks of detonation and limiting mine clearance activities.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), one of the main obstacles that it faces in assisting returnees is landmines. "Landmines must be cleared before we can make any official movements. We can't implement our plans until the routes are cleared." With people returning to areas that are not mapped, mine risk education is essential, but the refugee agency does not have the resources to provide it. Currently, UNHCR has one officer working on the issue in Sudan and one person in Geneva working on it part time. Resources are scarce for all aspects of refugee return and there are many competing demands, but mine risk education must be a priority. Without increased resources from donors, UNHCR's attempts to protect returnees from landmine violence will only be cosmetic.

Returning Sudanese have high expectations for visible 'peace dividends.' With disarmament stalled and tensions among militias and other armed groups continuing, progress on

landmine clearance is essential. A man who was returning to Upper Nile State told RI, “We decided to try to go to [our village] and went with a convoy of vehicles that was leaving for the first time. The old roads have been mined and we had to make a new road. It used to take us two hours but it took us 48 hours to get there. Three people died of thirst along the road and we saw four other dead people as well.”

The demining process is slow and painstaking in the best of circumstances. While mechanized vehicles can help, they often break down and are expensive to maintain. There is a very small window of opportunity in south Sudan when the physical conditions are right to do mine clearance. The last dry season from November to April passed with few successes; lack of political will from the governments of Sudan and a lack of resources for the international community prevented significant progress.

The Governments of National Unity and of South Sudan made political commitments to rid Sudan of landmines during the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005. The previous government in Sudan also made legal and political commitments to the elimination of landmines when it ratified the Mine Ban Treaty in October 2003. It established a national mine action structure, composed of the National Mine Action Office in the north and the New Sudan Mine Action Directorate in the south, both of which committed to implement a Strategic Framework Agreement for mine action. However, action has been very slow. Rather than take responsibility to clear the mines that they laid, both governments have shown little interest, preferring to shift the responsibility and the blame to the United Nations.

According to officials of the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), both armed forces have been resistant to removing, marking, and even surveying their landmines. In addition, some local governments are using the issue of landmines politically, charging UNMIS with the task of removing all mines. In Malakal, the deputy governor was openly hostile to UN mine action declaring in March 2006, “We have ordered [the deminers] either to start their work and finish it as soon as possible, or they leave the town immediately.” The unwillingness on the part of Sudan’s new institutions to implement the provisions of the CPA and to provide adequate humanitarian mine action casts serious doubts on their commitment to peace and reconstruction. This doesn’t have to be the case. “Mine building can be a positive peace building step,” a former mine action agent told RI. “In the Nuba Mountains there was a lot of reluctance on both sides to disclose these military secrets. But the process of surveying and clearance, once agreed upon, brought both sides together and showed the people that their government was trying to protect them.”

The UN Mine Action Services (UNMAS) does not have the mandate or the resources to clear the estimated 16 million square meters of minefields in Sudan. Rather it has been instructed to build the capacity of the new government to handle the problem itself. Capacity-building, while time consuming, is essential as large numbers of expatriate staff working on mine clearances is a huge financial burden for UNMAS and diverts much needed resources.

Currently, UNMAS’s priority is to clear humanitarian routes to enable the international agencies to provide much needed aid for both returnees and those living in south Sudan. Mined roads are hampering delivery of humanitarian assistance. A recent funding overview by the Office of the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan shows funding for mine action stalled at 27.8% of the requested budget. “With adequate financial support, the UN would be able to clear 80 percent of the high impact areas within three to five years,” said an UNMAS official. “Surveying is another huge priority. There are large areas of the country that we haven’t been able to get to,” added another official. On 4 April, the International Day for Mine Awareness, the Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan issued a plea that donors increase their support for mine action in Sudan saying, “More de-mining activities now will bring the immediate peace dividends to the people of Sudan.”

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS THAT:

- ❑ The Governments of National Unity and of South Sudan fulfill their obligations under the Mine Ban Treaty and the CPA by marking minefields and creating a mechanism to ensure coordination of activities between north and south Sudan;
- ❑ Local, regional and national Sudanese authorities cooperate with UN agencies in mine action activities to enable the implementation of de-mining programs;
- ❑ The Sudan governments ensure that proper resources are available for landmine clearance, mine risk education, and for survivors of landmine accidents;
- ❑ UNHCR devote more resources to mine risk education for returnees and donors increase resources to UNHCR for these activities; and
- ❑ Donor countries increase their support to improve the capacity of UNMIS to carry out mine action services in south Sudan.

Advocate Sarah Martin visited south Sudan in March. Jennifer Hoffman, a student at Columbia University assisted with the preparation of this bulletin.