

IRAQ: Mine-free 2018 target will be missed
By IRIN
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BAGHDAD, 22 May 2012 (IRIN) - Iraq is drawing detailed maps of areas contaminated by landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), but is unlikely to clear these areas by a 2018 deadline, says a government official.

"Lack of detailed maps for landmines was one of the major problems and it delayed our mine-clearance efforts because the previous regime planted them randomly," Deputy Environment Minister Kamal Hussein Latif told IRIN.

"We have teamed up with the ministries of interior and defence since 2011 to start our own survey which will help to identify the exact contaminated areas," he said.

Despite this, Latif added, the country will not meet the 2018 deadline to clear all landmines and UXO. Iraq set itself the target in 2008 when it joined the Ottawa Convention, under which it committed not to use, produce, acquire or export landmines.

The first province to be mine-mapped is Thi Qar, 400km south of Baghdad, where 98sqkm are confirmed as hazardous. Teams will continue work this year in the most contaminated southern provinces of Basra, Maysan, Muthana and Wasit.

"These areas represent almost 80 percent of the contaminated areas nationwide," the deputy minister said. "The maps, which we plan to have ready by the end of the year, will help us draw up the best plans and the budget, and identify the number of teams needed and the time required to clear each area."

Many of Iraq's landmines date back to the 1960s when fighting began between the Baghdad government and pro-independence Kurdish rebels in the north. The 1980-88 Iraq-Iran war, the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 US-led invasion added to the problems.

The largest contaminated area stretches for hundreds of kilometres along the border with Iran. Large quantities of UXO also remain scattered throughout cities and towns. Today, Iraq is one of the most mine-contaminated countries in the world with landmines and UXO covering 1,730sqkm, according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Around 1.6 million Iraqis in 1,600 communities, or one in every 20 Iraqis, are affected.

Up to 90 percent of contaminated land is agricultural, with many landmines also found around major oil fields.

A recent survey conducted by the UN Inter Agency Information and Analysis Unit found that per capita income is lower in mine-contaminated areas; education achievement is lower in mine-contaminated areas; households in districts with mines are more food insecure; residents of districts with mines rate services such as education and electricity access poorer than those without mines, according to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

In 2011, some 30 mine-related incidents were reported with 33 percent of cases fatal. According to UNDP, about 60 percent of reported landmine incidents involved people aged 25-44, while 47 percent of reported UXO incidents involved children aged 5-14.

Frustrated by the slow pace of demining, the government also plans to involve private deminers. "If I work according to the Defence Ministry approach we will need 25 more years and that's why we want the private sector to get involved," said Latif

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