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Landmines Threatening Millions in Zimbabwe

By Staff Reporter

HARARE - Two decades of a campaign to de-mine Zimbabwe border areas has invented fresh problems for villagers living along the Zambezi Valley and those along the Mozambican border.

Border areas were heavily mined to slow down the progress of guerilla fighters crossing the mighty Zambezi River on the country's northern border onto the battlefield during Zimbabwe's 16-year guerilla war for independence that ended in 1979.

But the mine clearance exercise has open new avenues for cross-border cattle rustling creating insecurity among the villagers living along the Zambezi Valley.

During the Defence Forces Day celebrations on 15 August, President Mugabe commended the work to demine border areas done by the Zimbabwe National Army.

So pleased with the success of such hazardous work was Mugabe that he promoted military men involved in the exercise and awarded them medals as Commander-in Chief of the Defence Forces .

Government says more than 276 square kilometres of mine-infested land between the Victoria Falls and Mlibizi Fishing resort bordering Zambia would soon be handed over to the Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and Urban Development and the Ministry of Environment and Tourism for productive use.

Clearing thousands of anti-personnel landmines laid during the independence war opened corridors for armed cross-border cattle rustlers into the Zambezi Valley areas of Kazungula, Victoria Falls, Hwange and Binga as well as along the border with Mozambique, local chiefs say.

"People from across the river have intensified their cattle rustling activities stealing goats, sheep, donkeys and cattle. The villagers are helpless against armed cattle rustlers," says traditional Chief Zondani Joan Shana of rural Hwange.

He says when Zambians realised that the landmines had been cleared they started crossing the Zambezi to poach villagers' livestock.

Grave

The minefields had acted as a deterrent but posed grave danger to both humans and livestock

Chief Shana estimates that more than 420 beasts have been stolen from January to March this year.

A frightening aspect of the problem is that the cattle rustlers arm themselves with firearms retrieved from caches that have remained a hazardous legacy after the end of independence war.

"The Zambians seem to know places where arms were cached during the cease-fire period. They know how to negotiate their way to get these firearms that they use to intimidate the villagers," Chief Shana says.

"They know too a lot about landmines and they can find their way to the firearms without danger."

President Robert Mugabe, said the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF) had de-mined the Gona-reZhou National Park in south eastern Zimbabwe.

Mugabe said de-mining the area would spur efforts to put in place the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park - a multi-billion dollar tripartite tourist project involving Zimbabwe South Africa and Mozambique on stream.

Along the eastern border in areas such as Chikombedzi, Malipati, Gezani and Mkakani in the rural Sengwe cattle rustling has proved a headache to local chiefs who believe that rustlers drive stolen herds into Mozambique where they fetch hard currency.

Cattle

While local villagers, some of whom own up to 200 head of cattle welcome the de-mining plan, others fear it might open a safer corridor for cattle rustlers from neighbouring Mozambique.

"It is now a problem we have learnt to live with. The minefields had somewhat slowed rustlers," says Chief Lisimati Sengwe.

Another chief in the area said some of the villagers had armed themselves with bow and arrows and tracked the rustlers into Mozambique.

The rustlers, he said slaughtered some of the beasts and dried the meat on their way back home where there is a ready market.

He said villagers hoped the government would react swiftly to the people's plight.

Cattle rustling appears to have replaced rhino poaching mainly undertaken for its horn which has subsided due to protracted joint efforts by the Zambian and Zimbabwean government.

Ranger

A senior game ranger in Gona reZhou who spent 15 years in Hwange National Park and the Zambezi Valley but now operates from Chiredzi district in south eastern Zimbabwe says poaching for rare species remained prevalent in the Zambezi area.

Game ranger Luke Njiva says poachers operating in the Zambezi Valley came mainly from Zambia and Angola.

"Poaching in the Gona reZhou is not so damaging because it is mainly for subsistence purposes unlike the poaching in the Zambezi Valley which is for commercial purposes.

For instance cattle rustlers last year shot and killed a Chiredzi village head, his wife and two children after accusing them of reporting their criminal activity to the police.

Suspects

According to the police the suspects, who were working as a syndicate with Mozambicans, had been responsible for rampant stock theft activities in Chikombedzi and taking the loot to Mozambique for sale.

Police had recovered six AK 47 rifle cartridges and a Mozambican matchbox at the scene.

The headman had teamed up with the police and recovered seven of his stolen cattle in Mozambique.

Police Commissioner, Augustine Chihuri last month announced, during a police graduation ceremony, that the force had established a crack nati-stocktheft unit to curb cattle rustling.

Rustlers had taken advantage of a breakdown in law and order on commercial farms following the relocation and resettlement of new families on land forcibly acquired from white commercial farmers.

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