

# Experts say landmine threat hinders socio-economic development

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AMMAN — When the threat of landmines deprives communities from planting their farmlands or transporting goods to the market to earn a living, social and economic development is hindered.

The impact of landmines, which affect some 25 countries worldwide, was raised by mine action specialists Monday as being a reality in Middle East where thousands of landmines are still buried.

Experts from Iraq, Sudan, Somalia and Yemen attending the UNDP Mine Action Workshop, will over the next four days discuss how best to formulate mine action priority plans to help forward their countries' broader development agendas.

According to Ian Mansfield, operational director of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, landmines left behind by conflict have a direct impact on the lives of populations around the world, including this region.

"Although demining is a slow and labour-intensive process, it is essential that mine-affected areas are first cleared in order for people to

be able to go about their daily lives safely," Mansfield told The Jordan Times.

"More importantly, however, countries also need to look at the long-term development problems of these mines on different areas such as agriculture, tourism and transport, to see how to set priorities for mine action," he added.

According to Mansfield, once that is established, mine action priority plans can be integrated within overall government development agendas.

In Mozambique for example, mine action plans were linked to the country's poverty reduction efforts, as communities in some villages found a solution to their water problem.

Unable to reach clean drinking water across a mine-riddled field, the community built a well nearby, thus avoiding the probable threat of stepping on a mine.

These short-term solutions may protect citizens from the potentially fatal accidents, but they are an ongoing threat in other places.

Global figures estimate that 80 million landmines are still buried worldwide, while around 90 countries have

stockpiled some 230 million landmines in their arsenals

Here in Jordan, the Jordan Royal Engineering Corps has been committed, since 1993, to rid the Kingdom's soil of some 300,000 landmines strewn across different parts of the Jordan Valley, and near its eastern border with Iraq and its southern border with Syria since the 1967 war.

Jordan also created a country team of relevant stakeholders in August 2003, which identified demining operations, rehabilitation and integration of victims and increasing awareness among affected communities, as the main priorities over the coming two years. Military records indicate that over 300,000 mines covering 6,000 hectares of land were laid in Jordan by both Jordanian and Israeli forces as early as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

By the middle of last year, national demining efforts eliminated 98,000 landmines with technology and equipment donated by the US, Britain, Canada and Norway. The remainder will be removed by 2010.

In the meantime, however, these silent killers are estimat-

ed to affect 10 per cent of the Kingdom's population, holding large expanses of Jordan Valley agricultural land hostage and posing a threat to local communities there.

Jordanian demining operations officer Major Emad Herzallah yesterday spoke of some the challenges they faced. To sweep for mines in the gruelling heat of the Jordan Valley, demining teams wake up at the crack of dawn to conduct their work.

"These deminers, with their heavy protective gear, face many pressures and risks while searching for landmines, whether using manual methods or other equipment," said Hirzallah.

"Sometimes our machinery would get stuck in muddy areas, so we had to leave the area for two weeks until the ground dried up and resume work later," he added.

It is interesting to note that while producing one landmine can cost as little as \$3, removing it can cost up to \$1,000.

UNDP Resident Representative and Resident Coordinator in Jordan Christine McNab yesterday highlighted the value of such a meeting for the region where conflict has hindered

sustainable human and economic progress from flourishing.

She referred to the Kingdom as one of the many countries that have been investing in mine action to support long-term socio-economic development.

"In Jordan, as in other countries represented at this meeting, the mine problem is a serious public safety concern, and it is an economic challenge to the country as a whole," said McNab.

"Mines pose a significant economic impact by denying access to large areas of high-potential agricultural land in Jordan, and in certain areas, a major obstacle to the growth of the tourism industry," she added.

However, according to the UNDP official, a well-coordinated and effectively planned national mine action programme could help promote further protection of citizens and also support long-term socio-economic development.

UNDP currently provides mine action support to 25 countries worldwide, helping governments build sustainable national and local capacities to address the socio-economic consequences of landmine contamination.