RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- Syria and its allies should ensure that their armed forces do not use cluster munitions.
- Syria should accede to the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) as a matter of priority.
- Syria should initiate survey and clearance of cluster munition remnants (CMR) as soon as possible and take other measures to protect civilians from explosive remnants of war (ERW).
- Syria should permit and facilitate access for mine action operations for a humanitarian purpose.

CONTAMINATION

Syria has widespread CMR contamination resulting from the armed conflicts continuing since 2011. Syrian government and Russian forces have used cluster munitions extensively and Islamic State has reportedly used them in a number of instances, but the extent of contamination is not known.[1] Opposition group Jabhat al-Nusra has also produced videos showing Russian-made submunitions being adapted for re-use as projectiles.[2]

In February 2017, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported "an alarming number of incidents involving cluster munitions", affirming that their use in densely populated areas such as eastern Aleppo "constitutes the war crime of indiscriminate attacks in a civilian populated area".[3]

Among multiple reports of attacks using cluster munitions, which could not be independently verified, the Syrian Network for Human Rights said that in the 12 months up to 27 February 2017 Russian forces conducted 121 cluster munitions strikes. It said these attacks brought the total number of cluster munitions strikes by Russia since it intervened in the conflict in 2015 to 175, mostly in Aleppo (89 attacks), Idlib (68) and Hama (9), causing the deaths of 93 civilians and injuring 417 others.[4] Human rights groups have reported heavy bombardments with cluster munitions and other weapons of towns and villages in opposition-held areas of southern Dar'a governorate since March 2017.[5] Syrian Civil Defence (SCD) has reported clearing large numbers of submunitions in Idlib and to a lesser extent in Dar'a, Hama, and Quneitra over the past two years (see Land Release section on page 144).[6]

Other conflict reports point to probable areas of CMR contamination. Human Rights Watch said that as part of an offensive in northern Syria, Syrian and Russian forces carried out at least 12 attacks using cluster munitions between 19 and 30 September 2017. It reported civil defence and first responders had located CMR, mostly ShOAB-0.5 submunitions, in the towns of al-Tamanah, Jisr Al-Shughur, Maraat Harma, Qalaat al-Madiq, and Tel'adeh.[7]

Amnesty International reported further air strikes using cluster munitions in October and November 2017 as Syrian and Russian forces escalated their attacks on the rebel-held Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta, eventually recaptured by government forces and their allies in April 2018.[8] Human rights organisations reported heavy civilian casualties in an airstrike with cluster munitions on the village of Dablan in an Islamic State-held area of north-eastern Syria, close to the border with Iraq.[9]

Other Explosive Remnants of War and Landmines

Syria's seven-year conflict has left heavy contamination by a wide range of explosive ordnance, including landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and air-dropped and artillery ordnance (see Mine Action Review's *Clearing the Mines* report on Syria for further information). HALO Trust said it considered contamination to be so large that "the work required will be measured in decades, not years".[10]

PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

Syria does not have a national mine action authority or a national programme for survey and clearance. Mine action has been conducted by a wide range of organisations, including military engineers of parties to the conflict, civil defence organisations, humanitarian demining organisations, and commercial companies.

Russia deployed several hundred military deminers from the Armed Forces Demining Centre supported by mine detection dog teams and Uran-6 mine detection robots. Deployments included 200 deminers sent to Aleppo governorate, 150 to Palmyra, and 175 who were due to be sent to Deir Ezzour governorate.[11] Some deminers were reportedly among troops due to return to Russia under the withdrawal announced in December 2017.[12] Russian deminers also provided training for Syrian army engineers at Hmeimim air base and at training centres established in 2017 in Aleppo and Homs. By the start of January 2018, Russian armed forces reported they had trained 900 Syrian engineers.[13]

International humanitarian and commercial operators were active mainly in north-eastern Syria in areas recaptured from Islamic State by Kurdish and US-led coalition forces, but their identities remain anonymous on the basis of security concerns. Syrian Civil Defence, supported with training and funding through Mayday Rescue, had clearance teams working in five governorates (Dar'a, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Quneitra) and conducted a range of other activities (community liaison; risk education) in several other governorates.[14]

HALO Trust partnered with a Syrian NGO, SHAFAK, which conducted community impact survey, risk education, and victim data collection in Aleppo, Idlib, and Rural Damascus provinces in 2017. The partnership agreement with SHAFAK, based in Gaziantep, Turkey, started in mid-2016. Deteriorating security forced it to stop operating in Rural Damascus in March 2018. In mid-2017, The HALO Trust started partnering with another Syrian NGO to recruit, train, and deploy teams for non-technical survey and disposal of ERW. In mid-December 2017, these three teams deployed in Dar'a and some districts of Quneitra provinces, and were reconfigured into five teams in March 2018. The teams worked under supervision of five HALO Trust international staff working from a remotely located operations room, connected by phones and tablets. The teams photograph all items for identification and receive instruction on disposal and rendering items safe.[15]

Following on from UN Security Council Resolution 2165 (2014), which authorised cross-border humanitarian assistance into Syria, the UN regional humanitarian coordinator requested UNMAS to provide assistance for mine action in Syria. In 2015, UNMAS opened an office in Gaziantep and established a mine action sub-cluster to integrate mine action into the broader Syria humanitarian response. In September 2017, UNMAS opened an office in Beirut to coordinate support provided through offices in Gaziantep and Amman for 27 mine action organisations undertaking activities that included community-level contamination impact surveys, marking of some hazardous areas, risk education and clearance.[16] UNMAS also maintained an incident database in Amman making data on contamination available to humanitarian agencies. UNMAS discussed establishing a presence in Damascus with the Syrian government but as at February 2018, it had not received approval to conduct the assessment mission.[17]

Information Management

UNMAS maintains an incident database in Amman making data on contamination available to humanitarian agencies.[18] Since September 2017, iMMAP has provided information management services for North East Syria coordinating data received from operators on hazard locations and results of non-technical survey, clearance, and risk education.[19]

LAND RELEASE

Continuing conflict prevented a coordinated national programme of mine action in 2017 though mine action interventions gathered significant momentum, albeit at levels that varied in different regions according to the level of security.

UNMAS reported contamination impact surveys and non-technical surveys were conducted mostly in north-west and southern Syria, within Aleppo, Dar'a, Idlib, and Rural Damascus, governorates, and in Quneitra governorate, particularly in the sub-districts of Atareb, Busra Ash-Sham, Hrak, Izra', Maaret Tamsrin, and Suran.[20] International operators also conducted community impact assessments and non-technical and technical survey in the north and north east of the country.

Details of Russian military clearance are not available, but Russian media reported military deminers cleared more than 30km^2 in Syria between December 2016 and the end of February 2017.[21] Army engineers reported they cleared some 20km^2 in the course of two operations at historic Palmyra in 2016 and 2017, removing over 24,000 ERW items, but there was no indication of whether they encountered CMR.[22] Russian and Syrian army engineers were also active around Damascus and its suburbs, where opposition-held areas became the target of a major Syria-Russian offensive in early 2018.

In the areas of north and north-east Syria recaptured by Syrian Democratic Forces and the US-led coalition, humanitarian and commercial operators sharply scaled up operations, employing several hundred staff conducting community needs assessment and ERW clearance activities in al-Hassakeh, Deir Ezzour, and Raqqa governorates but submunitions represented a small proportion of items cleared.[23]

SCD conducted community impact surveys that provided a basis for clearance teams to plan and prioritise tasks. At the start of 2018, capacity included one clearance team in each of Hama, Idlib, and Quneitra governorates and two teams in Dar'a. SCD/Mayday said submunitions constituted the "vast majority" of items cleared in the course of conducting roving tasks in response to community requests. Teams conducted roving spot tasks responding to the impact of conflict. Between November 2015 and March 2018, SCD teams cleared nearly 16,000 submunitions, 11,759 of them in Idlib governorate, as well as 521 other items of UXO. In 2017 alone, SCD cleared 6,633 submunitions and marked 903 others found in circumstances that obstructed clearance.[24]

The HALO Trust and SHAFAK started operations in early December 2017, with community liaison teams surveying and compiling maps of contaminated areas in Dar'a as a basis for planning and clearance. By the end of March 2018, they had conducted 234 spot tasks in Dar'a (217) and Quneitra (17), destroying a total of 317 items (124 submunitions and 193 other UXO items).[25]

ARTICLE 4 COMPLIANCE

Syria is not a state party to the CCM and therefore does not have a specific clearance deadline under Article 4 of the Convention. Nonetheless, it has obligations under international human rights law to clear CMR as soon as possible.

1 Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Evidence of Islamic State Cluster Munition Use", 1 September 2014.

2 Kenton Fulmer, "Jabhat al-Nusra re-purposing SPBE and AO-2.5RT submunitions in Syria," Armament Research, 18 October 2015.

3 Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria, UN doc. A/HRC/34/64, 2 February 2017, §57. In an annex to the report on the applicable law the Commission again asserts that: "When used in densely-populated areas such weapons [cluster munitions] are inherently indiscriminate." Ibid., Annex 1, §44.

4 Syrian Network for Human Rights, "Russian forces are worse than the Syrian regime in terms of use of cluster munitions", 24 March 2017.

5 Syrians for Truth and Justice, "Cluster bombs kill and injure civilians in Daraa province", 18 July 2017.

6 Mayday Rescue, "Syria Civil Defence, Explosive Hazard Mitigation Project Overview, Nov 2015–Mar 2018", 1 March 2018.

7 Human Rights Watch, "Russia/Syria: Deadly airstrikes on trapped civilians", 31 October 2017.

8 Amnesty International, "Syria: Banned Soviet-made cluster munitions fuel humanitarian catastrophe in Eastern Ghouta", 30 November 2017.

9 "'Cluster bombs' dropped on IS-held village", BBC, 28 June 2017.

10 HALO Trust, "Survey and Explosive Hazard Removal in Dar'a and Quneitra Governorates, Southern Syria", undated but 2018, p. 1.

11 "Russia sends demining team to Syria to clear Aleppo's liberated", PressTV, 3 December 2016; "Russia sends 150 demining experts to Palmyra", Reuters, 16 March 2017; "Russian sappers arrive in Deir Ezzour", Tass, 11 September 2017.

12 "Russian sappers arrive in Syria's Deir Ezzour", Tass, 11 September 2017;

13 "Russian military boosts qualified Syrian sappers to demine war-ravaged country", Tass, 9 January 2018.

14 Telephone interview with Luke Irving, Specialist Training and EOD Manager, Mayday Rescue, 28 March 2018; Mayday Rescue, "Syria Civil Defence, Explosive Hazard Mitigation Project Overview, Nov 2015–Mar 2018", 1 March 2018; email from international mine action operator on the basis of anonymity, 3 May 2018.

15 Interview with Tim Porter, Regional Director for the Middle East, Trust, in Geneva, 15 February 2018; email from Adam Boyd, Programme Manager, HALO Trust Syria/Jordan and Rob Syfret, Deputy Programme Manager and Operations Manager, HALO Trust, 18 May, 13 and 21 June 2018; HALO Trust, "Survey and Explosive Hazard Removal in Dar'a and Quneitra Governorates, Southern Syria", undated but 2018.

16 Interview with Gilles Delecourt, UNMAS, Geneva, 16 February 2018; and email, 22 May 2018; UNMAS, "Programmes in Syria", updated March 2018, at http://www.mineaction.org/programmes/syria.

17 Interview with Paul Heslop, Chief of Programmes, UNMAS, in Geneva, 13 February 2018.

18 Interview with Paul Heslop, Chief of Programmes, UNMAS, in Geneva, 13 February 2018.

19 Email from Noor Zangana, Technical Adviser Syria and Iraq, iMMAP, 18 July 2018.

20 Email from Gilles Delecourt, UNMAS, 22 May 2018.

21 P. Antonopoulos, "Russian deminers continue to clear east Aleppo of explosives", The Arab Source, 28 February 2017, at: https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-de-miners-continue-clear-east-aleppo-explosives/.

22 "Russian army engineers demined 24,065 explosive objects in Syria's Palmyra", Defence World.net, 6 October 2017.

23 Email from international mine action operator on condition of anonymity, 3 May 2018.

24 Telephone interview with Luke Irving, Mayday Rescue, 28 March 2018; Mayday Rescue, "Syria Civil Defence, Explosive Hazard Mitigation Project Overview, Nov 2015–Mar 2018", 1 March 2018. Emails from Michael Edwards, Operations Manager, Mayday Rescue, 29 June and 2 July 2018.

25 Email from Adam Boyd and Rob Syfret, HALO Trust, 18 May 2018; HALO Trust, "Survey and Explosive Hazard Removal in Dar'a and Quneitra Governorates, Southern Syria", undated but 2018.