

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- Egypt should accede to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) as a matter of priority.
- Despite not yet being a State Party to the APMBC, Egypt has obligations under international human rights law to clear anti-personnel mines in areas under its jurisdiction or control as soon as possible.

ANTI-PERSONNEL MINE CONTAMINATION

The precise extent of anti-personnel mine contamination in Egypt remains unknown and past estimates have been unreliable. Egypt is contaminated with mines in the Western Desert, which date from the Second World War, and in the Sinai Peninsula and Eastern Desert, which are a legacy of wars with Israel between 1956 and 1973. Some recent mine incidents in Sinai may have been caused by mines emplaced by anti-government jihadist groups.¹ It was reported in August 2016 that Islamic State had been digging up Second World War-era landmines and re-using them.²

Most of the Western Desert contamination occurred around the location of Second World War battles that took place between the Quattara depression and Alamein on the Mediterranean coast. Other affected areas lie around the city of Marsa Matrouh and at Sallum near the Libyan border. In November 2016, during a ceremony to mark the opening of a new prosthetic limb centre, the United Kingdom's Ambassador to Egypt announced that all the maps of minefields laid by British and Allied forces during World War II had been handed over.³ According to the head of the military engineering department, though, the British minefield maps were "sketch maps" and most of the mines were buried randomly.⁴ Major General Mahrous Kilani, Head of the General Secretariat for Mine Clearance, reported that while the mine maps are an indication of possible mine locations many mines have been found in areas that are unmarked by the maps.⁵

In January 2018, the British MP Daniel Kawczynski put a written question to the UK Secretary of State for International Development asking whether her Department was taking steps to assist with the mapping and disposal of Second World War mines in the Tobruk and El Alamein regions. The United Kingdom reiterated that maps of minefield locations had been provided to the Egyptian authorities and that, since 2006, through multilateral funding along with other donors (including Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States), it had funded clearance of 130,446 acres (some 520km²) of land around El Alamein.⁶

The Egyptian government has claimed that some 17 million mines remained in the Western Desert and another 5.5 million in Sinai and the Eastern Desert.⁷ In an April 2009 assessment, though, the United Nations (UN) Mine Action Team cautioned that data needed careful analysis to avoid reporting areas that had already been cleared and thereby misrepresenting the problem.⁸ In this regard, in October 2017, it was reported by the European Union (EU)'s ambassador to Egypt that 2,680km² of land in the North West Coast was claimed to still be contaminated.⁹

In August 2010, the Executive Secretariat for the Demining and Development of the North West Coast (Executive Secretariat) reported to donors that the army had destroyed 2.9 million mines while clearing 38km² in five areas, leaving "more than 16 million mines" covering an estimated area of 248km².¹⁰ Details of items cleared are not consistent with other available information.

In 2013, the army handed over to the Ministries of Housing and of Planning and International Cooperation an area of some 105km² in the Western Desert, which it had reportedly cleared of mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). Details of clearance operations were not reported. Minister of Housing Tarek Wafiq was quoted as saying that with completion of the project one-fifth of the Western Desert had been cleared.¹¹

In August 2016, it was reported that Islamic State had been harvesting the explosives from Second World War mines still uncleared in Egypt. According to Ambassador Fathy el-Shazly, formerly the head of Egypt's Executive Secretariat for Mine Clearance, "We've had at least 10 reports from the military of terrorists using old mines. Even now, these things trouble us in different ways."¹² These findings were reiterated in June 2017 at a UN Security Council briefing when Egypt's permanent representative to the UN Amr Abdel-Latif Abul Atta stated that "abandoned mines and explosive remnants of wars have become a source of access for armed movements and terrorists to find materials for manufacturing improvised explosive devices".¹³ It was reported in January 2018 that Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), which pledged allegiance to Islamic State in 2014, has been using old mines and caches of explosives left in Sinai to produce different types of explosive devices. There were at least five major attacks by terrorist groups using such devices in Egypt in 2017.¹⁴ This should serve as a wake-up call to Egypt to pursue mine clearance with far greater vigour than it has done so thus far.

PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

In 2019 as in previous years, the mine action programme in Egypt was not functioning effectively.

A joint project between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Egypt, entitled, "Support the North West Coast Development Plan and Mine Action Programme: Mine Action" was conducted in two phases from 2007 to 2014 and from 2015 to 2017.¹⁵ In August 2017, it was reported that negotiations had begun on a third phase of the project to allocate \$5 million to clear the rest of the northern coast and the Sinai peninsula.¹⁶

The project provided for the creation of an "Executive Secretariat for Mine Clearance and the Development of the North West Coast", which is mandated with coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the development plan and humanitarian mine action activities in the North West Coast.¹⁷

The army is the only entity authorised to demine in Egypt. However, the Executive Secretariat supports clearance operations through demining requests received from concerned ministries. It was reported that a total area of 2,182km² of land has been demined from 5,100 km² of contaminated land since the beginning of the project in 2009.¹⁸

Trained deminers from the Corps of Military Engineers conduct manual and mechanical demining. The Executive Secretariat is said to have procured 461 mine detectors, 355 demining suits and protective helmets, one Casspir armoured vehicle with the "Mine Lab" detecting device, and five Amtrak vehicles.¹⁹

According to its website, "the Executive Secretariat's Quality Management Unit proactively guarantees quality in all key processes, makes sure that quality requirements are fulfilled in accordance with IMAS, measures process performance, develops procedures, and provides the right equipment".²⁰ Funding was also used for capacity building, establishing a quality management unit, and supporting the creation of the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database.

In November 2019, Egypt's Minister of Investment and International Cooperation signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) on mine clearance and development of Egypt's North West coast. The MoU provides a cooperation framework to enhance capacity building for the Egyptian mine action programme.²¹

In May 2017, Kuwait granted Egypt an aid package of almost US\$1 million through the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, for mine clearance in the North-West Coast area.²² In January 2019, Egypt called for renewed international support for mine clearance, especially around El Alamein. Parliament member Mohamed el-Ghoul resubmitted a 2017 motion demanding financial compensation from the countries that laid mines in Egypt, mainly Germany and the United Kingdom.²³

LAND RELEASE

Egypt has not reported on its release of mined areas in recent years and no target date has been set for the completion of mine clearance.

- 1 "Sinai landmine kills three soldiers", News24, 9 March 2015, at: bit.ly/31LTzVp.
- 2 P. Schwartzstein, "ISIS Is Digging Up Nazi Land Mines in Egypt", Newsweek, 10 August 2016, at: bit.ly/2KBMTgz.
- 3 A. Nayder, "Helping Landmine Victims in Marsa Matrouh-And Preventing More", Because, 3 November 2016, at: bit.ly/2Hbsl2V.
- 4 Egypt and Libya: Land Mines: Written question - 122961, 16 January 2018, at: bit.ly/2Z4gJsB.
- 5 "MG: We cleared 130,000 acres of mines in El Alamein and there was no single incident", Times of Egypt, 26 February 2018, Unofficial translation at: bit.ly/33EQrMO.
- 6 Egypt and Libya: Land Mines: Written question - 122961, 16 January 2018.
- 7 State Information Services, "Landmines in Egypt", 20 July 2009; M. Abdel Salam, "First phase of demining in Egypt complete", Bikyamasr (blog), 18 April 2010.
- 8 UN Mine Action Team, "Egypt Mine Action Inter-agency Assessment", 14-18 April 2009, p. 11.
- 9 "Egypt battles landmines 75 years after El Alamein", Agence France-Presse, 28 October 2017, at: bit.ly/2H92GYA.
- 10 "Egypt Mine Action Project Northwest Coast: Phase I Accomplishments", Presentation by Amb. Fathy El Shazly, Director, Executive Secretariat, Cairo, August 2010.
- 11 N. al Behairy, "20% of the Sahara in West Egypt cleared of landmines", Daily News, 20 March 2013.
- 12 P. Schwartzstein, "ISIS Is Digging Up Nazi Landmines From World War 2 As Explosives", Newsweek, 10 August 2016.
- 13 UN Security Council meeting, UN doc. SC/12866, 13 June 2017, at: bit.ly/2YSmjPL.
- 14 "How Egyptian security dealt with IEDs threat?", Egypt Today, 1 January 2018, at: bit.ly/2HbRwCe.
- 15 UNDP, "Support to the North West Coast Development and Mine Action Plan", undated.
- 16 "Egypt to invest \$17.5M in Anti-Mines Action Project", APA News, 11 August 2017, at: bit.ly/2z1ChYn.
- 17 The Executive Secretariat for the Demining and Development of the North West Coast website, accessed 5 July 2020, at: bit.ly/3ivjTwl.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 "Egypt, Switzerland sign agreement on demining North West Coast", State Information Service, 14 November 2019, available at: bit.ly/2CcF0mj.
- 22 "Kuwait provides KWD 300,000 to help clear landmines from Egypt's north coast", Ahram Online, 8 May 2017, at: bit.ly/33Grilg.
- 23 "Cairo seeks international help to clear millions of land mines", Al-Monitor, 11 February 2019, at: bit.ly/2Z9k18K.