SYRIA

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- **Syria 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, Syria has obligations under international human rights law to clear mines in areas under its jurisdiction or control as soon as possible.**
- **Syria should establish a mine action authority and expedite access for international demining organisations to facilitate a credible humanitarian demining programme.**
- **Syria should initiate a programme of mine survey and clearance as soon as possible and take other measures to reduce the risk to civilians of mines and explosive remnants of war.**

ANTI-PERSONNEL MINE CONTAMINATION

Syria is heavily contaminated by mines and mines of an improvised nature used extensively by parties to the country's eight-year-old conflict. It also has mined areas left by successive Arab-Israeli wars since 1948.

The extent of contamination is not known. The United Nations (UN) estimated in 2019 that mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) affected 2,563 communities and 11.2 million people and that it recorded an average of 184 explosive incidents every day.[1] Human rights groups reported heavy civilian casualties from mines and ERW in many governorates in 2019 and 2020, further attesting to the density of the contamination.[2]

The Syrian government reportedly laid mines along borders with Turkey and Lebanon in 2012 and Turkish authorities claimed five years ago that between 613,000 and 715,000 mines had been planted along the Turkish-Syrian border, making clear they were not emplaced by Turkish forces.[3] In Manbij, close to the Turkish border, heavy casualties from mines, including those of an improvised nature, occurred after Kurdish forces pushed out Islamic State in mid-August 2016 and were still occurring as a result of continuing conflicts in 2019.[4] Islamic State heavily mined the approaches to Manbij and around the Tishreen dam to the east of it, using young boys disguised as shepherds to lay the mines, the UN Commission of Inquiry monitoring the conflict in Syria reported in March 2017.[5]

In Aleppo and neighbouring Idlib governorates, volunteers similarly report mines and other explosive devices planted in agricultural fields, next to roads, inside villages, and around schools and hospitals.[6] Rebel forces which subjected the towns of Foua and Kfraya to years of siege are said to have left hundreds of mines in surrounding fields as well as individual explosive devices in many homes.[7]

Further south in Hama and Homs governorates, open-source reports of mine casualties, although unconfirmed, are suggestive of significant contamination left by all sides during years of conflict.[8] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that between 24 February and 17 March 2019 it documented the death of 44 people in mine and improvised explosive device (IED) explosions in Deir Ezzour, Homs, and Hama. It also documented casualties from mines, including those of an improvised nature, around towns in the southern province of Dara.[9]

From Raqqa, former capital of the self-proclaimed Islamic State caliphate, to Hassakeh governorate in the north-east, and south to Deir Ezzour and Barghuz (the last remaining Islamic State stronghold overrun in May 2019), retreating Islamic State forces left massive contamination of mines of an improvised nature and other improvised devices. These have taken a heavy toll on returning civilians: non-governmental organisation (NGO) Médecins sans Frontières reported that the number of victims of mines and other explosive devices it treated in north-east Syria doubled between November 2017 and March 2018. Half of them were children. Its patients reported discovering mines and booby-traps on roads, beside fields, on rooftops, and under staircases, as well as rigged devices placed in common household items from refrigerators and air conditioners to televisions and cooking pots.[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, largely determined by the forces controlling different regions.

In areas under government control, these have included mainly Russian and Syrian military engineers and civil defence organisations. International and national demining organisations conducted clearance in north-east Syria controlled by the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces. Turkey reported its security forces cleared mines and IEDs in areas of northern Syria it occupied in October 2019.[11]

Russia deployed several hundred military deminers from its Armed Forces Demining Centre from 2017 onwards, conducting clearance with manual teams supported by mine detection dogs and Uran-6 mine detection robots. Russian troops also provided training courses 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.[12]

Russia started to withdraw troops, including deminers, from Syria in 2018 but its Ministry of Defence continued to report mine clearance and EOD in Syria in 2020.[13] Russia appealed to other countries in 2018 to provide support. Armenia responded by sending an 83-man team to Syria in February 2019, planning to focus its work on the northern governorate of Aleppo.[14] Armenia rotated a new team to replace the first after four months.[15]

National operators included Syrian Civil Defence (SCD), widely reported as White Helmets, which worked with six clearance teams and three community liaison/survey teams in north-west Syria in 2019. Three clearance and two survey teams operated in Idlib province, a focal point of conflict in 2019, with two clearance teams and one survey team working in Aleppo and one clearance team in Hama province. Teams mostly destroyed cluster munition remnants (CMR) and other unexploded ordnance tackling a wide range of unexploded ordnance (UXO). In January 2019 five SCD staff took part in a two-week course delivered remotely in humanitarian response to IEDs focusing on search, identification and threat assessments to increase team safety in their daily search and rescue activities.[16]

AFAK, a Syrian NGO working in partnership with The HALO Trust, conducted clearance in the southern provinces of Dar'a and Quneitra in the early part of 2019 until a Syrian army offensive took control of the area.[17]

In areas outside government control in the north east, humanitarian demining organisations and commercial companies have conducted large-scale clearance in areas recaptured from Islamic State. Tetra Tech worked operated in Raqqa, Deir Ezzour, and, after its recapture in 2019, in Barghuz. Funded by the United States (US) Department of State, Tetra Tech focused on critical infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, water pumping stations, and electricity generating plants. A small national organisation, Roj Mine Control Organization (RMCO), was conducting clearance in north and north-east Syria but reportedly sustained heavy casualties among its deminers attempting clearance of improvised devices.[18]

The UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Syrian government in July 2018 under which it deployed two staff to Damascus in October 2018. After meeting Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad in Damascus in October 2019, UNMAS Director Agnes Marcaillou reported the government had agreed to the involvement of international demining organisations. They would be registered by the government and coordinated by UNMAS, which stated that discussions were underway on plans for survey, marking, and clearance.[19] As of May 2020, however, no international demining organisations had registered with the government and UNMAS remained focused on training Syrian partners for risk education and community survey. Between January and July 2019 teams had surveyed 365 areas in Aleppo, northern Hama and Idlib governorates, marking 370 explosive items.[20]

In January 2019, UNMAS started a first risk education training course for 26 Syrian personnel, of whom 16 were women.[21] Since then, risk education has expanded, including through joint initiatives with UNICEF.[22]

Russia announced in March 2019 it would provide funding of US$1 million to support UNMAS's activities in Syria.[23] In April 2019, UNMAS announced a "Humanitarian Mine Action Support to Syria (31 March 2019–31 March 2020)" project, supported by a $1.4 million grant from Japan, which is expected to deliver risk education to 43,000 people and conduct contamination impact surveys in 85 communities, as well as marking and fencing off explosive hazards.[24]

LAND RELEASE

Syria's continuing conflict prevented progress towards a coordinated national programme of mine action. Comprehensive information on outcomes of survey and clearance in any areas was unavailable.

Syrian deminers were reported to have cleared mines and explosive devices in areas recaptured from opposition armed groups. Among tasks continuing in 2020 was clearance of the Damascus-Aleppo highway.[25] Armenia's Centre for Humanitarian Demining and Expertise reported that by April 2020 the Armenian army engineers had cleared 147,697m^2 and destroyed more than 300 mines.[26] An Armenian deminer was injured in the explosion of a mine or IED in March 2019 resulting in amputation of a foot.[27] Demolitions of cleared items are conducted by the Syrian military.[28]

Humanitarian mine action in north-east Syria halted after President Trump's October 2019 announcement of US withdrawal from Syria and Turkey's October 2019 invasion and occupation of parts of northern Syria and the move of Russian troops into northern Syria. Some clearance operations had reportedly resumed by early 2020 but the extent was unknown.

Tetra Tech had operated with approximately 400 personnel in the north east in 2018 but after President Trump's December 2018 announcement of the US intention to withdraw from Syria it reduced capacity from seven multi-task teams. In 2019, it was working with two multi-task teams and two risk education teams until halting operations in October. After suspending Syria operations, the programme closed temporarily in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.[29]

1 Statement by Agnes Marcaillou, Director, UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), to the UN Security Council, New York, 24 October 2019.

2 See for example "Syria: Bachelet warns of 'ticking time-bomb' as civilian casualties mount," Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 8 May 2020; "The explosion of a landmine of the war's remnants north of Hama kills and injures 5 persons raising to 137 the number of people who were killed in explosions of landmines and IEDs throughout Syria in 7 months," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 16 September 2019.

3 "Syria: Army planting banned landmines", Human Rights Watch, 13 March 2012, at: bit.ly/2Ybz9rK; "Thousands of landmines planted along Turkish-Syrian border", *Middle East Monitor*, 21 November 2013, at: bit.ly/2Mt7efE.

4 See, e.g., "Rural Aleppo: explosions on the rise in Manbij City", *Enab Baladi*, 2 February 2019 at: bit.ly/2MoBbxq; O. Haj Kadour, "Bus blown up by landmine in Syria's Manbij: 1 dead, 5 injured", *Agence France Presse*, 2 February 2019.

5 Conference Paper by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, UN doc. A/HRC/34/CRP.3, 10 March 2017, para. 90.

6 "Syrian volunteers risk lives to clear landmines", *Aljazeera*, 8 April 2016, at: bit.ly/2K2J8Hn.

7 "Inside Foua: A Shi'a town in the eye of the Syrian storm", *Middle East Eye*, 19 August 2018.

8 See, e.g., "5 killed, 6 injured in landmine blast in Hama countryside", IRNA, 3 September 2018; and "4 Civil Defence workers killed clearing landmines in northern Homs", Zaman al Wasl, 18 May 2018.

9 "In three successive weeks, the landmines that the organization planted to protect itself kill 44 citizens, mostly women and children, and injure tens others in different Syrian areas", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 17 March 2019, at: bit.ly/2LMbjMy.

10 "Syria: patient numbers double in northeast as more people return home to landmines", *MSF*, 3 April 2018, at: bit.ly/2SKjUQB.

11 "Turkey destroys hundreds of mines, IEDs in Syria," Anadolu Agency, 9 January 2020. It said the Turkish Ministry of Defence reported destroying 891 landmines and 1,660 IEDs.

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

13 See, e.g., "The Leramun district of the Syrian city of Aleppo will be cleared of explosive devices by the end of April," Report, Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides, 27 April 2020. The report did not state who conducted the clearance. The centre said engineers had cleared over 3,000 hectares (30km^2), 3,112 buildings and 273 kilometres of roads, destroying 34,000 explosive items, including 5,400 IEDs, but did not say in what period of time.

14 "Russia calls for international support for demining efforts in Syria", *Xinhua*, 7 July 2018; and "Armenia sends deminers to Syria as part of Russia-backed mission", *Radio Free Europe*, 10 February 2019, at: bit.ly/2K1gIxo.

15 "Armenia sends another group of sappers, medics, to Syria", *Radio Free Europe*, 5 June 2019, at: bit.ly/2ym8SaY.

16 Email from Michael Edwards, Explosive Hazards Operations Manager, Mayday, 25 May 2020.

17 Email from Adam Boyd and Rob Syfret, HALO Trust, 18 May 2018; and HALO Trust, "Survey and Explosive Hazard Removal in Dar'a and Quneitra Governorates, Southern Syria", undated but 2018; and interview with Tim Porter, Director of Programmes, HALO Trust, in Geneva, 5 February 2019.

18 S. Kajjo, "Landmine removal crucial in post-IS Syria", *Voice of America*, 3 April 2019; and interview with operators, Erbil, Iraq, May 2019.

19 Statement by Agnes Marcaillou, Director, UNMAS, to the UN Security Council, 24 October 2019.

20 Ibid.

21 "Syria, UN Mine Action Service, Sign MoU", Syrian Arab News Agency, 8 July 2018, accessed at bit.ly/2Hjenwl; and interview with Gilles Delecourt, Senior Programme Manager, UNMAS, in Geneva, 7 February 2019.

22 Email from UNMAS, 5 September 2020.

23 "Russia allocates $1 million to UN for demining of Syrian territories", *Tass*, 15 March 2019.

24 UNMAS, "Japan contributes to humanitarian mine action in Syria", 15 April 2019.

25 "Army engineering units dismantle landmines and IEDs planted by terrorists on Aleppo-Damascus highway," *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, 15 February 2020.

26 Statement marking International Day of Mine Awareness, Armenia's Centre for Humanitarian Demining and Expertise website, 4 April 2020, available at: bit.ly/2WRuurh.

27 "Armenia sapper wounded in Syria landmine explosion, foot amputated", *News.am*, 8 March 2019, at: bit.ly/2YfQkbS; "Armenian sapper in Syria seriously wounded while clearing mines", *Radio Free Europe*, 8 March 2019 at: bit.ly/2YlRHkk.

28 "Armenian humanitarian mission demines 34,693 sq. m. territory in Syria", *Aysor.am*, 1 July 2019 at: bit.ly/2K2JzBv.

29 Interview with Gareth Hawkins, Syria CWD Chief of Party, Tetra Tech, Erbil, 10 May 2019; and email, 11 May 2020.