Clearing Minefields in Israel and the West Bank

Recent legislation in Israel has opened the door to demining in Israel and the West Bank. Roots of Peace campaigned for this legislation and will begin demining a village near Bethlehem before the end of 2011.

by Dhyan Or and Heidi Kühn | Roots of Peace |

The Mine-Free Israel campaign, a humanitarian effort led by a coalition of organizations comprised of Roots of Peace, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Center for Regional Councils, Council for a Beautiful Israel, local authorities from mine-affected communities and landmine survivors, has paved the way for humanitarian demining in Israel and the West Bank. The campaign recently helped pass unprecedented mine-action legislation in Israel and raise public awareness about mines in the West Bank. According to the new law, the Israeli government established a national mine-action authority, with an annual budget of 27 million NIS (US$7.3 million), scheduled to begin humanitarian demining in Israel in early 2012. In order to mirror this policy shift in the West Bank, Roots of Peace, the coordinator of the cross-sector coalition mentioned above, adopted a minefield in Husan, a Palestinian village near Bethlehem and raised funds to begin demining there before the end of December 2011. With help from several foundations and individuals, including a legacy gift from Shirley and Paul Dean of Spiritera Vineyards, Roots of Peace will remove the landmines and transform the field of death in the midst of Husan village into a field of life, where fruit trees can grow once again, and boys and girls can safely walk and play.

Minefield History

More than 1.5 million landmines laid during the 1950s and 1960s contaminate a combined area of 50,000 acres (200 square kilometers) in the Golan Heights, in the Arava Valley and along the Jordan River. This includes more than 300,000 landmines and residential land in the West Bank, with unexploded ordnance further making sites inaccessible. Mined areas in the region include some religious and World Heritage sites of high significance to Christianity, Islam and Judaism, especially the site known as Qar’ al-Yahud (Palace of the Jews) where many believe Jesus was baptized. Joshua crossed the Jordan River and Prophet Elijah is believed to have ascended into heaven. Approximately 3,000 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, as well as booby traps, surround ancient monasteries and places of worship belonging to a variety of religions and held sacred by billions of people around the world. Husan is a Palestinian village located about 4 miles (6 km) west of Bethlehem and 6 miles (10 km) southwest of Jerusalem, with a population of 6,000 people, half of which are children, and an area of 1,800 acres (7.4 sq. km.), 87 percent of which are agricultural and residential land; and the second part, north of the road, and consists of 4.5 acres (18,211 square meters) of grazing land. The Israeli military bulldozed two small sections of the southern minefield in order to erect a watchtower on a hilltop overlooking Husan. Additionally, the military shoveled mine-contaminated soil onto the northern minefield to allow the erection of a metal fence between Husan and the bypass road to protect cars from Intifada stone-throwers. This redistribution of dirt and contaminants further polluted the northern minefield.

In 2002, at the urging of the NGO World Vision and the Palestinian charity Health Work Committees, MAG attempted to conduct demining in Husan but failed to secure the Israeli authorities’ approval and the project did not materialize. Once the Intifada subsided, the Israeli courts granted permission to the landowners residing along the edge of the northern minefield to clear the contaminated land. The Israeli military insisted that only a designated, army-approved, private Israeli firm could conduct the demining, and local residents would have to bear the cost, which was well above their means. Then in 2010, Israeli advocacy group Yesh Din approached private Israeli demining firms on behalf of Husan landowners in an attempt to negotiate a low-cost demining contract. Even though Yesh Din found a military-approved firm to demine Husan, this firm’s estimated cost to complete the work was unaffordable, and the firm required landowners to sign a No-Shop Agreement prohibiting them from obtaining a more competitive bid.

Israeli Policy Shift

Despite repeated landmine and UXO incidents, until 2011 no mine-action policy existed in Israel. Several failed attempts at introducing a mine-action legislation from 2002 to

Notes from the Field

Palestinian youth cycles past a minefield near Bethlehem. Photo courtesy of Roots of Peace.
2004 failed due to lack of public support. However, after an intensive public-relations campaign inspired by 11-year-old local landmine survivor Daniel Yuval who lost his leg to a landmine in the Golan Heights in 2010, 73 out of 80 rank-and-file members of parliament cosponsored the Minefield Clearance Act which was eventually passed, with active support of the government and the Prime Minister on 14 March 2011. According to the new legislation, the Israeli National Mine Action Authority was established, and tasked with the creation and implementation of the first national humanitarian-demining plan. In September 2011 INMAA published the first draft of the national mine-action standards, held a first meeting of its advisory committee, which includes members of government offices and public representatives, and announced two pilot projects in the upper Arava Valley to be conducted in 2012.

Demine-Replant-Rebuild Initiative in the West Bank

According to Israeli and international law, the Israeli law does not apply to the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Defense Forces have shared control of civilian and security affairs. Still, the recent policy shift was welcomed by both the PA and the IDF, and raised expectations for a parallel change in mine-action policy in the West Bank. In Husan, local residents, who have been disappointed time and again after failed appeals for the removal of the constant threat of landmines from the midst of their village, are expressing renewed confidence in the possibility of realizing this wish. Once cleared, the land could be returned to productive use, helping boost local economy, which is characterized by high unemployment rates. Following clearance, the local community is planning to replant olive trees, expand the homes of the large families living around the

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The Impact of ERW on Children

This article provides a brief description of the threat cluster munitions, landmines and other explosive remnants of war pose to children worldwide. The discussion of children’s physical susceptibility and the psychological and socioeconomic effects that accompany wounds and disabilities provides a broad picture of the impact ERW have on children. The article also explores rehabilitative support, as several sources provide a variety of recovery strategies that focus on community support for the future well-being of child survivors.

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nown as killing fields in Cambodia and devil’s gardens in Afghanistan, areas contaminated with explosive remnants of war are known for their im-
portability when claiming victims, the majority of whom are children.1 In Southern Lebanon, submunitions continue to in-
jure and kill children returning home after the 2006 Israeli-
Hezbollah War when they mistake them for toys.2 In Lao PDR, infamously the most bombed country in the world, children returning home from school are killed by handling submuni-
tions they find on the roadside.3 In May 2011, a submunition, which the victim believed to be a ball,4 killed a 13-year-old boy from Western Sahara who was herding animals, and an old cluster bomb killed three boys ranging in ages six to 12 while they were playing in a garden in Southern Iraq.5 Also, Libyan children living amidst the ongoing civil war suffer in-
juries from cluster munitions and indiscriminate mortar and rocket fire.6

Global Picture

While civilians constitute roughly 70 percent of all casual-
ties caused by cluster munitions, landmines and other ERW, the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor reports that chil-
dren make up one-third of casualties worldwide.7 UNICEF reported that from 2008-2010, children accounted for half of all civilian casualties.8 Among child casualties, boys consti-
tute the highest percentage where the gender is known, com-
posing nearly three-fourths of all ERW casualties.9 In fact, 10 countries report boys as their largest casualty group.10 ERW, however, also affect girls who are often more stigmatized for injuries. Their disabilities are seen as burdens to families, and as a result, girls represent an under-reported statistic.11 Along with an unfamiliarity of the various types of explosives and a tendency to play in workable areas, natural curios-
itvity and a smaller body size render children more susceptible to the effects of ERW than adults.

Susceptibility of Children

Since rural areas are most often affected, using land for farming, grazing, hunting, collecting firewood and various other activities often brings civilians into contact with ERW.12 An inability to read and heed warning signs leaves children susceptible to mines, and their playful nature often leads to mistaking submunitions as bails, rations, soda cans or toys.13 Furthermore, the presence of these explosives can effective-
ly nullify the land’s agricultural capability, affecting a com-

Unity economically while also threatening the community’s physical well-being, as the threat of detonating ERW is as potent as malnutrition and starvation.14 Inhabitants may be compelled to use the land for less lucrative purposes to avoid...