Mines Reap Grim Harvest

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The rate of casualties from landmines has eased, but shows little sign of falling further, leaving new generations maimed by past wars.

Concentration etched on his face, the young boy lurches hesitantly forward. Mohammad Agha, 14, is learning to walk again - an artificial leg replacing one blown off by a landmine not far from Kabul.

He and hundreds of others – boys, girls, men and women – are part of the latest crop of casualties in one of the world’s most heavily mined countries.

Up to 10 million anti-personnel and anti-tank mines were planted in shifting battle lines by various forces during more than two decades of wars. Most minefields are unmarked.

“I lost my leg three months ago. While I was grazing my sheep, I heard the strange sound of a mine exploding, but I didn’t know what had happened because I lost awareness,” Mohammad Agha told an IWPR reporter early one August morning as he tentatively leaned on the prosthetic replacing his right limb.

“When I opened my eyes I was in the emergency hospital and when I wanted to walk, I couldn’t. Then I saw I had lost my leg.”

There are mines everywhere, from the most desolate mountain areas, where they hindered recovery of bodies from a crashed airliner earlier this year, to war-ruined houses in gentle countryside, and even inside cities.

The mine that took off Mohammad Agha's leg had been planted in Paghman, some 15 kilometres outside of Kabul. The area, with cool streams, trees and grass in the foothills of the Koh-i-Baba mountain range, is a magnet for many of the overcrowded capital’s estimated three million people seeking to escape the urban dust, noise and heat.

Mine victims come from all parts of the country to a single-storey, cream-coloured concrete building in Kabul, the main orthopaedic centre of the International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC.

In the first six months of this year, the centre admitted 589 new patients. Most were victims of mine explosions, although the project, originally founded to treat war-related wounds, was expanded in 1995 to help anyone who was “motor-disabled” such as with polio or spinal injuries.

"Eighty per cent of the amputees who came in this year up to June had been maimed by mines," said Najmuddin, the official in charge of the Kabul centre.

It’s a percentage consistent with that recorded over recent years: mine victims account for nearly 23,000, or 76 per cent, of a total 30,098 amputees registered by the ICRC.

As Mohammad Agha practised walking unaided and without crutches, under a shelter in the centre’s
grounds, 13-year-old Sayed Noor Hussain watched as he sat in a wheelchair and waited to be fitted with an artificial leg.

Noor Hussain is from Paktia province, south of Kabul, and had come with his father, Noor Mohammad.

The boy told IWPR, “There were a lot of ruined houses in our village. I was playing with my friends in one of them when a mine exploded. I didn’t know what happened, but when I opened my eyes, I was in hospital.

"When I see my friends playing with each other, I do wish I could play with them too."

Treatment by the ICRC is free, but transport and medicines are still a burden on families. "I have spent a lot of money on my son," said Noor Mohammad. "It came to 120,000 afghanis, about 2,400 US dollars."

The ICRC orthopaedic project started in 1988 – the year before Soviet troops pulled out after 10 years of occupation. Both the Russians and their mujahedin opponents laid thousands of mines during that period and thousands more were buried in years of civil war and strife that followed.

In 1995, the centre treated 2,698 people who had lost limbs, most of them to exploding mines. The number of patients it treated annually remained fairly constant for the next four years.

Since 2000, the numbers have steadily declined, with the centre caring for just over 1,000 patients in 2004. It looks likely that a similar number of patients will come in this year, meaning that about 20 people continue to be maimed by land mines each week.

There are now six ICRC-sponsored centres providing orthopaedic services in Afghanistan. Overall, they have fitted more than 54,000 artificial limbs and distributed more than 100,000 pairs of crutches since they started.

The true number of those maimed by landmines is difficult to assess.

According to figures provided by the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan, UNMACA, an average of 80 people a month have been killed or disabled by such devices so far this year, compared with an average of 70 a month for 2004.

Masood Ahmad Hamidzada, speaking for UNMACA, said that between 1996 and 2001, while the Taleban were in power, the average number of casualties from mines was around 120 a month.

All across the capital, there are daily reminders of the lethal nature of mines.

Amid chaotic traffic at crossroads in Kabul, one-legged men balance on crutches to beg from passing motorists. Others who have lost both legs sit perilously in the middle of the road, their stumps exposed as they ask for alms.

The problem is not going to go away, despite the fact that some 8,600 people are working on mine clearance.
Abdul Baseer Saeed is an IWPR staff reporter in Kabul.

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