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Kurdistan's Erbil Mine Action Center

The Erbil Mine Action Center (EMAC) of the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency increases mine risk education efforts in the spring to reduce high casualty rates during this season. EMAC also conducts landmine clearance in Iraqi Kurdistan.

by Jamal J. Hussein [Erbil Mine Action Center]



Remnants of bones in the minefield at Choman district, Iraq (July 2013).

All graphics courtesy of the author.

The spring season is a busy time in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. Several national holidays, such as Newroz (Kurdish New Year), fall between March and April, and many Kurds celebrate by enjoying picnics in mountain locations, green areas and along riverbanks. Similarly, many residents begin planting crops and gathering herbs in the spring, an act that often occurs near or within contaminated areas. These outdoor activities result in an increased number of injuries from landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) during the spring.

Erbil Mine Action Center's Role

To reduce the number of casualties, the Erbil Mine Action Center (EMAC) at the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency (IKMAA) increased mine risk education (MRE) activities in the spring. Funded by the Kurdistan Regional

Government (KRG), EMAC issues safety instructions and MRE teams perform special awareness training in mine and ERW affected areas.

KRG provides all sustainable funding for mine action in the Kurdistan region. At IKMAA's request, some short-duration projects, such as MRE and trainings, received limited funding from outside parties (e.g., UNICEF, Handicap International and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining). Funding from outside agencies is not a reliable and ongoing source; funds received vary from year to year.

Delivering MRE

MRE teams are composed of locally trained staff that follow MRE awareness guidelines provided by EMAC. Beginning the first week of March and continuing until the end of April, teams conduct one special MRE session per affected district, making an effort to reach residents and nomadic families.

Each district in Kurdistan has its own security checkpoint. The MRE team provides posters and other MRE instruction to all persons passing through checkpoints. Through television, radio, security checkpoints and community presentations, MRE teams can effectively communicate MRE to villagers and communities prior to the spring season.

In spring 2012, EMAC visited 72 villages to deliver MRE and distributed more than 4,600 leaflets, booklets, posters, landmine photos and instructions, which benefited more than 2,000 men, women and children. In March 2013, these numbers were halved due to snow, rain and other inclement weather; therefore, MRE teams could not reach all planned targets. However, villagers responded positively and the casualty rate dropped during the spring seasons of 2011–2013 in targeted areas, suggesting that MRE awareness trainings may have made a difference.

EMAC also conducts MRE sessions for schoolteachers and students as needed, depending on available funding. In 2012,



Newly erected mine warning signs in Diana subdistrict, Garoy Omeraga minefield, Iraq (October 2013).

197 teachers and 1,054 students were trained, and in 2013, 103 teachers and 723 students were trained. In 2014, EMAC concentrated on training educational supervisors to monitor MRE teaching, which is a part of the primary-school curriculum. Prior to 2014, EMAC had not trained supervisors. During the months of March and April 2014, 106 supervisors, 34 teachers and 128 students were trained.

As part of the Community Based MRE (CBMRE) project, 34 villagers were trained in 2012 to work as MRE volunteers that disseminate information on safe behaviors in their communities and report anything that is ERW related to IKMAA MRE teams.¹ In 2013, 32 villagers were trained. Additionally in 2013, EMAC distributed MRE materials including 730 leaflets, 250 posters and 73 guidance booklets as part of CBMRE activities. Moreover, the number of villages to join the CBMRE project increased from 17 to 20 from 2012

through May 2014. Likewise, the number of child beneficiaries also increased from 441 to 799 over this same time period.

According to IKMAA, a preliminary technical survey conducted from 2009 to 2010 found that since 2003, no additional landmines had been laid. The Information Management System for Mine Action department in IKMAA headquarters maintains all mine action center records. Weekly and monthly progress reports track mine/ERW victims. Data from 2013 indicates that a total of 56 victims were recorded in the Kurdistan region during that year and, of these, the Erbil governorate had 11 victims.²

Combating Challenges

In the future, EMAC plans to increase its capacity and resources to raise clearance production by EMAC demining teams and demining companies. Likewise, EMAC plans to utilize the newest generation of demining assets such as

EMAC Spring 2014 MRE Guidelines

1. Do not approach unfamiliar areas that you have not visited previously. Ask others who know the area if it is safe. Mined areas do not always have signs and most mines lie just beneath the surface.
2. Do not approach areas marked by mine signs (red triangle), rocks painted red and marked with the letters BM (Benchmark), previous military posts, battle areas, areas surrounded with barbed wire or locations with pictures of bone and ERW.
3. When gathering edible herbs, picnicking or pasturing animals, only enter areas known by the public to have no mine risk.
4. Do not approach, touch or throw objects at mines or unknown items because explosions can be fatal or cause severe injury.
5. Call the EMAC emergency number to report landmines, ERW and other threats, or to seek emergency help.

| Year | Month | Number of Beneficiaries | | | | Number of Villages Visited for MRE | Number of MRE Aids Distributed |
|------|---------------|-------------------------|-------|----------|-------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | | Men | Women | Children | Total | | |
| 2012 | March + April | 389 | 601 | 1,017 | 2,007 | 72 | 4,670 |
| 2013 | March + April | 179 | 321 | 415 | 915 | 30 | 2,145 |

Table 1. MRE beneficiaries 2012–2013.

| Year | Number of Teachers Trained | Number of Students Trained | Number of Educational Supervisors Trained | Number of Volunteers from Villagers Trained | Number of Villages Joined CBMRE Project |
|--------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| 2012 | 197 | 1,054 | 0 | 34 | 17 |
| 2013 | 103 | 723 | 0 | 32 | 20 |
| 2014 to date | 34 | 128 | 106 | 0 | 0 |

Table 2. CBMRE training summary, January 2012–May 2014.

| Year | Number of Villages of CMBRE Project | Number of Beneficiaries | | | Number of MRE Aids Distributed |
|------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|----------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| | | Men | Women | Children | |
| 2012 | 17 | 670 | 450 | 441 | 2,070 |
| 2013 | 20 | 517 | 702 | 799 | 703 leaflets 250 posters 73 MRE Guidance Booklets |

Table 3. CBMRE Project 2012–2013.

detectors or mechanical clearance machines; deliver more targeted MRE sessions to at-risk individuals; distribute safety messages through the Internet and mobile phones; and engage media to reduce the mine/ERW impact. According to IKMAA, 20 to 27 percent of Erbil governorate’s minefields were cleared and handed over to the owners.

EMAC’s mine action program still faces several key challenges. Kurdistan has little information available about the location of mines, such as original minefield maps. Although EMAC survey teams gather information about contaminated lands from villagers, this is a slow process. Kurdistan’s weather, specifically in winter due to snow and rain, inhibits demining in the mountains where many minefields are located. In addition, valleys, dense bush, vegetation and hard ground complicate Kurdistan’s demining terrain. Metal fragments still contaminate battle areas from the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988),

making metal detector use less efficient. Additionally, most minefields were disrupted. In some cases, local villagers attempted land clearance by disarming visible mines or removing mines from the minefield and stockpiling them in another location. Finally, staff turnover is a problem at EMAC; due to limited resources, skilled and qualified personnel leave the program for better salaries and less rigorous work.

Although faced with a multitude of challenges, EMAC’s efforts to rid Iraqi Kurdistan of landmines continue. ©

See endnotes page 51



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