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# The Effects of ERW Contamination in Sri Lanka

by Jennifer Dathan [ Action on Armed Violence ]



Returnees arrive to destroyed and overgrown homes in recently cleared land in the Northern Province, Sri Lanka. Image courtesy of Jennifer Dathan, AOV, 2017.

**T**he Sri Lankan Civil War (July 1983–May 2009), between the government and the Tamil Tigers, was a conflict marked by the extensive use of explosive weapons. Predominantly affecting the majority-Tamil areas in the north and east (Tamil Eelam), the violence left deep scars upon the communities in these areas. The land is still heavily marked by the legacy of landmines, air-dropped bombs, and other explosive remnants of war (ERW).

Over the course of 26 years, widespread use of explosive weapons is thought to have killed more than 100,000 people and left many more injured.<sup>1</sup> Many survivors are missing limbs, while others are left with shrapnel embedded in their bodies, and still more are impacted by post-traumatic stress disorders and grief. By the time the civil war came to an end, 300,000 civilians had been internally displaced, and 145,000 had sought refuge abroad, where many remain.<sup>2</sup> Throughout

the areas most heavily impacted, much of the infrastructure lays in ruins with at least 350,000 homes damaged or destroyed.<sup>2</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the long-term socioeconomic impact from the widespread use of explosive weapons in this conflict has been profound, not least because of the extensive explosive contamination of the land. During the conflict, it was estimated that 650 minefields were created, preventing civilians from returning home, accessing land, and rebuilding their lives.<sup>3</sup>

When Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) carried out on-the-ground research in Sri Lanka in December 2017, it became clear that the reverberating harm from that conflict was still acutely felt and continues to stifle individual and community development.<sup>4</sup>

### **Socioeconomic Impacts of ERW**

With 650 minefields planted during the conflict and limited clearance of both mines and other ERW able to take place before the war came to an end, it is unsurprising that many Sri Lankans lost their lives to such devices. Reporting from UNICEF and *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor* indicate there have been 1,619 civilian casualties in Sri Lanka from mines and other ERW since the 1980s, though with reporting difficulties during the worst periods of the war it is likely to be an underestimate.<sup>5</sup> Since the end of the conflict, casualties have decreased with only eight reported casualties in 2015 and 2016 respectively.<sup>5</sup> As recently as September 2018, two volunteer deminers were killed in the northern provinces.<sup>6</sup> According to data from the government-run National Mine Action Center, there have been 285 people killed or injured from mines and other ERW since 2010, though many casualties may go unrecorded in rural areas.

A large number of civilians and ex-combatants still suffer from the effects of explosive contamination. The president of the Spinal Cord Injury Association, in the Northern Province, told AOA V that an estimated 90 percent of their patient members suffered from war-related injuries, from both shelling during the war and unexploded ordnance (UXO).<sup>7</sup> Much of Sri Lanka is not prepared to accommodate those with disabilities, and AOA V spoke with many people who struggled finding employment after their injury.

The main professions in the impacted areas often revolve around manual labor, with approximately 44 percent of young people in the Northern Province employed in the informal sector in 2014, compared to 35 percent nationally.<sup>8</sup> It is understandable that many with physical disabilities in the north and east of the country find difficulty gaining employment.

Dignity in labor is often a casualty of explosive violence. Many more victims and veterans were left struggling with

unstable part-time work, trying to make ends meet. AOA V spoke to one man while he was being fitted for a prosthetic, and he said that his loss of employment and income had left him wishing the shell that claimed the lives of his family members had also taken his.<sup>9</sup>

A return to employment for victims harmed by explosive violence is further hampered by the lack of access to prosthetics and other medical assistance. It is estimated that 90 percent of Sri Lanka's 160,000 amputees lack access to appropriate surgical procedures and prosthetic limbs.<sup>10</sup> While some were able to find consistent work, it was often due to assistance from the diaspora, and though expatriate cash still sustains many in the impacted areas, it has slowed since the end of the war.

In general, post-war Sri Lanka saw a significant economic boom, with annual GDP growth at 8–12 percent between 2010 and 2012, and an economy that has increased steadily at a rate of 3–5 percent in recent years.<sup>11</sup> However, the most contaminated areas from ERW in Sri Lanka see the lowest shares of GDP, and in that time the North's share of GDP between 2011 and 2015 decreased.<sup>12</sup> Poverty levels are also highest in those regions most impacted by explosive violence.<sup>13</sup>

Using the Sri Lankan national poverty line of about US\$1.50 per day, the proportion of people in Mullaitivu subsisting on this rate was 28.8 percent in 2017, in Mannar it was 20 percent, and in Kilinochchi, 12.7 percent.<sup>13</sup> Other districts with higher levels of poverty include Batticaloa (19.4 percent) in the Eastern Province, which was also highly impacted by the civil war, and Monaragala district (20.8 percent) in Uva province.

Monaragala is the only town not predominantly inhabited by Tamils. Moreover, when an international poverty measure is applied, the figures rise to 74.4 percent in Mullaitivu, 60.9 percent in Mannar, and 57.2 percent in Kilinochchi. These towns were amongst the most ERW-contaminated areas after the conflict.<sup>14</sup>

With a reliance on agricultural work in the region, where unemployment is as high as 60 percent in some key northern towns, ERW has been amongst the most serious strains on communities in the area.<sup>15</sup> A considerable barrier to agriculture, ERW prevents access to land where there is a risk of contamination, resulting in a loss of income for many. The situation is so desperate that, despite the danger, some continue to use contaminated land—risking their lives and the lives of their livestock.

Representatives from The HALO Trust in Kilinochchi explained to AOA V researchers that cattle still roam through minefields, and it is generally these animals that fall victim to the explosives. They recounted one incident the previous



Landmine clearance training being conducted in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka.  
*Image courtesy of Iain Overton, AOA, 2017.*

month where a cow in calf was killed in the Muhamalai minefield. This also meant a loss of income for the farmer to whom the cow belonged, as well as a significant amount of future earnings. Such a loss can present a substantial blow to farmers and their potential income; a pregnant cow alone is valued at 467,000 Sri Lankan rupees (about £2,185 or US\$2,857).<sup>16</sup>

### Clearance Challenges

Despite efforts, clearance remains slow. Given the variety of explosive ordnance used—alongside the use of small arms—the contaminated areas are littered with landmines (including improvised mines), unexploded missiles, grenades, and other UXO. Shrapnel and casings from exploded ordnance



HALO representatives show AOVAV examples of the types of ordnance cleared in Sri Lanka. Image courtesy of Iain Overton, AOVAV, 2017.

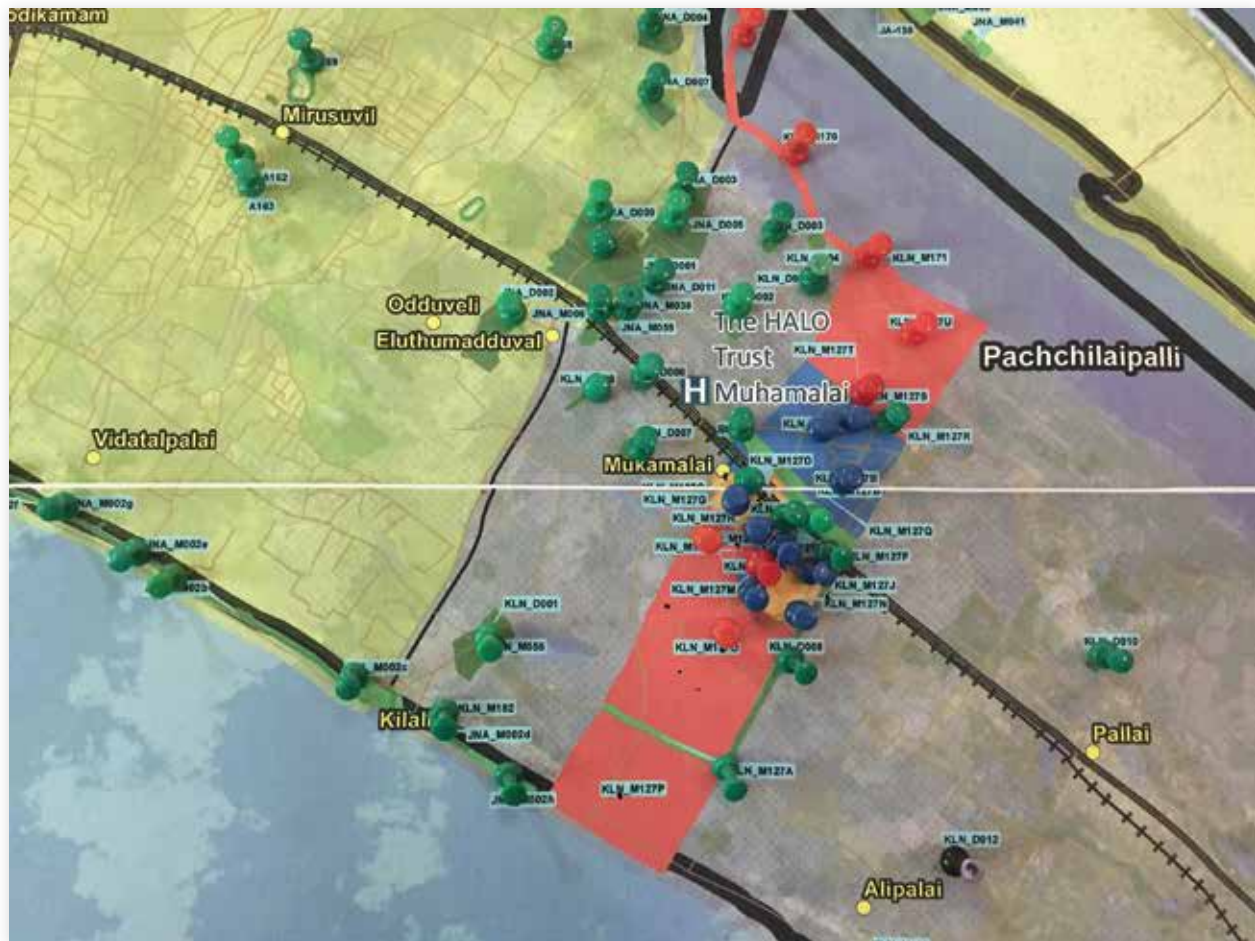
caused considerable contamination, increasing the difficulty for those clearing the land. On the one hand, it means that much of the contamination is random and widespread—without the pattern that may be expected from the conventional use of landmines. Secondly, much of the land must be cleared without the use of metal detectors due to the high levels of metal contamination in the soil. Such hindrances slow the process considerably.<sup>17</sup>

Of the 650 minefields that were in need of clearance, about 70 remain more than eight years since the end of the conflict, though some need reassessment.<sup>17</sup> HALO has estimated that around 2,500 people were still waiting to resettle on the land that remains contaminated, while other areas are needed for agriculture and other uses. However, in total, approximately 42,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) remain due to conflict-related impacts, according to statistics from the Internal

Displacement Monitoring Centre. The rate of return has slowed considerably to just 1,669 returnees in 2017.<sup>18</sup>

Numerous IDPs cannot return home even when the land is cleared. For some, their homes have been destroyed, and there is little accessible assistance to help them rebuild. In addition, due to widespread poverty and unemployment, few can afford to rebuild on their own. This poverty has been exacerbated by the many years citizens are displaced prior to clearance.

In Vasavilan East, in the Northern Province, returnees explained how their land had recently been declared mine-free, and this meant they were able to return after 20 years of displacement to begin rebuilding. But when they returned to the area, what had been their village was now thick with vegetation, trees had grown through their homes, and the buildings were destroyed. With no savings and no support, they worked



Map showing the progress of clearance at a HALO base in Kilinochchi, Sri Lanka. Image courtesy of Iain Overton, AOA, 2017.

together to clear the land but struggled to fund and find building materials.<sup>19</sup>

One man, Vijithkanith, in the Northern Province, said his father-in-law had recently been killed by ERW on his land while lighting a bonfire—the area had been declared mine-free only months before. Since then, Vijithkanith was concerned about working on his property, which his family relied on to survive.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

The socioeconomic impact from ERW is long-lasting and does not end when land is declared mine-free. Many have been displaced for generations, leaving the land unattended and damaged. Rebuilding takes time and funds, which the majority of IDPs lack. While some of these concerns could be better addressed with additional funding and support, the socioeconomic impact from ERW is clear, there is no quick remedy.

Clearance takes considerable funding, trained personnel, and time. In the meantime, civilians must contend with poverty. For the affected communities, redevelopment must focus on homes and livelihoods in the most impacted areas. Compensation and rehabilitation can ease the burden placed on the affected civilians. ©

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Jennifer Dathan is a researcher at Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), a London-based charity that researches and monitors the impact of violence worldwide. Currently she is the organization's lead Data Researcher, where her work is primarily focused on casualty recording and the long-term impacts of explosive weapons. Prior to joining AOAV, Dathan spent time at the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination after completing her Master of Arts in Human Rights, Globalisation and Justice at Keele University.