

Mines in Yemen: The "Buried Catastrophe"

By: Mohammed Abdrabbuh Nasser

Ali Al-Jumaai (43) did not know that his source of livelihood would be the cause of his permanent disability when he stepped on a landmine in Raghwan Valley, north of Marib governorate, leading to the amputation of his lower leg and multiple fractures in the other limb. Ali Al-Jumaai was tending to the sheep of local citizens in the area on March 12, 2023, when he stepped on a landmine, leading to his injury and transfer to Marib General Hospital. This valley is a border area between the regions controlled by the Houthi Ansar Allah group and the internationally recognized government forces.

Abdel Fattah Al-Qefili (14) is another story of children who lost their limbs due to landmines, mistaking one for a toy when he found it. It exploded while he was waiting for his friends to go to school in Al-Mahjaza, Sirwah district, on October 10, 2020. His "toy" left wounds that will accompany him for life, as he now uses a prosthetic limb and lives without a spleen, which doctors decided to remove due to the injuries caused by the mine.

Ali Al-Jumaai and Abdel Fattah were not the only ones who lost limbs due to the landmines planted in villages, residential neighborhoods, agricultural areas, and grazing lands. The number of victims continues to rise. A study by Save the Children in March 2023 titled "The Deadly Legacy of Yemen's Children from Explosive Remnants of War" revealed an increase in the number of child casualties from landmines and unexploded ordnance from one every five days in 2018 to one every two days in 2022. In 2022, more than half of the casualties from landmines and unexploded ordnance were children. The study reported that 657 Yemeni children were killed or injured by landmines and unexploded ordnance that year. The UN states that the war has led to the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with human rights groups accusing both sides of indiscriminate violence, including the use of banned anti-personnel mines by the Houthis.

Over the years, Yemen has suffered severe consequences from the use of landmines as a means of warfare and military escalation. The planting of mines is one of the dirtiest tactics used by warring parties to achieve military objectives. However, the negative impacts of mine planting extend beyond the actual conflict, significantly affecting civilians and local communities in Yemen.

One of the most visible effects of mine planting is the daily risk to individuals, especially children, women, farmers, and shepherds, leading to numerous injuries and deaths. Injuries often include limb loss, blindness, and severe burns, causing lasting physical and psychological effects on the victims and their families.

In addition to human losses, landmines also affect Yemen's infrastructure and economic development. When mines are spread in agricultural areas and other vital sites, local residents cannot access their lands and essential resources. Mines also hinder reconstruction and development efforts, requiring additional security measures and resources for demining and securing affected areas.

A report by Human Rights Watch stated that the use of mines by Houthi forces in areas essential for civilian survival, such as agricultural lands, water sources, and water infrastructure, has led to civilian starvation and exacerbated the crisis. According to Mwatana for Human Rights and Global Rights Compliance, Houthi forces have not shared any maps with demining authorities, violating their obligations under the Mine Ban Treaty.

The low cost of manufacturing mines makes them a common weapon in many conflicts. Mines are widely used to deny access to land or to spread terror among the population, having a devastating impact on civilians who continue to suffer from their effects for years or even decades after peace is restored. The International Committee of the Red Cross estimates that 2,000 people, three-quarters of whom are civilians, are injured or killed by mines each month. According to UNICEF, one million people have been injured by mines since 1975, one-third of whom are children under the age of fifteen.

History of Mines in Yemen

Yemen has suffered from the planting of mines since the political and military conflicts of the 1960s, through the central region wars and the events of 1994 and beyond. At the beginning of the 21st century, Yemen became the first Arab country to complete the destruction of its stockpile of anti-personnel mines.

The Yemen National Mine Action Center confirmed that Yemen, by signing the Ottawa Treaty for Mine Ban, which prohibits the planting, manufacturing, and importing of mines, destroyed its stockpile of mines by 2007. This made Yemen close to being declared mine-free. However, due to the ongoing conflict between Ansar Allah (Houthis) and the internationally recognized government, the phenomenon of mine planting increased from

the beginning of the conflict in 2011 and intensified in 2014 when the Houthis captured Sana'a.

Since then, and until the declaration of the truce in April 2022, a large number of mines have been planted in conflict areas across multiple provinces, in addition to the planting of mines in the Red Sea. Unfortunately, there are no clear maps of the mined areas, making future demining efforts extremely difficult. Yemen is now one of the countries with the highest proliferation of mines, which are globally banned.

A report by the American Center for Justice documented cases of killings, injuries, and destruction of private property caused by mines planted by the Houthi Ansar Allah group in 17 Yemeni provinces where battles took place from June 2014 to February 2022.

The report revealed the deaths of 2,526 civilians, including 429 children and 217 women, and injuries to 3,286 others, including 723 children and 220 women. Of the mine victims, 75% suffered permanent disabilities or disfigurements. The report also confirmed the complete destruction of 425 different private vehicles and the partial destruction of 163 others due to landmines. It recorded the deaths of 33 workers in the Saudi Project Masam for demining in Yemen, including 5 foreign experts, and the injury of 40 others.

Mwatana for Human Rights noted a significant increase in the number of mine victims in 2022, especially after the UN-brokered truce. The organization documented nearly three hundred civilian casualties from landmines, unexploded ordnance, and explosive remnants of war in various governorates between April and June of that year. This increase in casualties highlights the ongoing danger posed by mines, even in the context of reduced active conflict.

International Efforts and Local Responses

International and local efforts to address the issue of landmines in Yemen have included awareness campaigns, demining operations, and victim assistance programs. The UN, through various agencies, has provided support for mine action, including funding and technical assistance for demining activities. The Yemen Executive Mine Action Center (YEMAC), with support from international organizations, has been actively involved in mine clearance operations.

The Saudi Project for Landmine Clearance (Masam) is another significant initiative, funded by the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center. Masam has been working to

clear mines and other explosive remnants of war from conflict-affected areas in Yemen, aiming to create safe conditions for the return of displaced persons and the resumption of normal life.

However, the challenges remain immense. The lack of accurate maps of mined areas, the ongoing conflict, and the extensive contamination of land pose significant hurdles to demining efforts. The need for continued international support and cooperation is crucial to address the widespread threat of landmines in Yemen effectively.

The Human Cost and Long-Term Impact

The long-term impact of landmines in Yemen extends beyond the immediate physical injuries and deaths. The psychological trauma experienced by survivors and their families is profound and enduring. Children, in particular, face long-term consequences, including disruption to their education and development due to injuries and the fear of landmines.

Communities affected by landmines also suffer economically, as agricultural activities and livelihoods are hindered by the presence of mines. The contamination of land reduces access to vital resources, exacerbating food insecurity and poverty in a country already facing severe humanitarian challenges.

Conclusion

The issue of landmines in Yemen is a complex and multifaceted problem that requires a comprehensive and sustained response. Addressing the immediate threat through demining operations, providing support and rehabilitation to victims, and raising awareness about the dangers of mines are essential steps. However, long-term solutions must also involve political and security measures to prevent further planting of mines and to ensure lasting peace and stability in Yemen.

The international community, along with local actors, must continue to prioritize mine action as a critical component of humanitarian and development efforts in Yemen. Only through coordinated and persistent efforts can the buried catastrophe of landmines be effectively addressed, ensuring a safer future for all Yemenis.