KANDAHAR, Afghanistan (AP) - Mine sweepers say they have almost finished clearing southern Afghanistan of unexploded cluster bombs dropped by U.S. forces, a milestone in efforts to clear explosives from the world's most heavily mined nation.

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U.N.-backed teams have cleared 42 of 46 sites where 155 cluster bombs were dropped during the U.S. airstrike campaign last year. They expect to sweep at least one remaining site next week.

With the help of the United States, which supplied maps of strike areas, teams of mine clearers using metal detectors or explosives-sniffing dogs have worked quickly to clear areas that pose a risk to unwary Afghans who have never seen or heard of a cluster bomb.

"Cluster bombs were a danger - a new thing, unknown to the people," said A.G. Isolate, who heads the U.N. Mine Action Program in the five-province southern region that includes Kandahar, the nation's second-largest city and center of the ethnic Pashtun community.

About the size of a garbage can, cluster bombs contain 202 small bomblets. The bomblets, each about the size of a hand grenade, are designed to pierce light- armored vehicles, start fires and send shrapnel flying in all directions.

But some bomblets are duds that fail to explode either because of a malfunction or a soft landing. A bomblet can sit in place for years until someone sets it off.

Tragically, children often do: Some mistake the bright yellow weapon for a toy, accidentally detonating it. When it explodes, a bomblet breaks into tiny steel fragments honeycombed into the casing. The explosion is so powerful it can fuse stone and kill anyone within 100 feet.

The success of the mine-clearing program comes two months too late for Gulbebe, who lives with her husband and 10 children in a small village of mud huts on a flat, dusty plain south of Kandahar.

Her 12-year-old son was gathering wood with another boy when one of them accidentally detonated a bomblet, according to a villager who rushed to the scene after the explosion and saw yellow shards peppering the ground. Gulbebe's son, Abdul Wahid, was killed instantly. His friend, Fazal Mohammed, was loaded onto a tractor and driven to a Kandahar hospital, where he died the next day.

Gulbebe, who uses only one name, said she fears for the safety of her other children and won't allow them to stray far to collect wood. "My son is dead, I cannot get him back," she said as she sat on the parched earth, surrounded by barefoot children. "Even if they clear this area, that won't bring him back," she said.

With 310 square miles of land contaminated by land mines, the U.N.'s Isolate believes Afghanistan still holds the sad distinction of being the world's most heavily mined nation. That's despite a 12-year de-mining campaign that began when the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan and has cost $500 million so far.

"We are the largest program in the world, and the cheapest," Isolate said, noting the average cost of 65 cents to clear one square yard of terrain. "If we keep our present level of resources, by the end of 2009, the country will be cleared." The International Committee of the Red Cross estimates that 200,000 Afghans have been killed or wounded by mines in 23 years of war. As many as 300 people were killed each month in 2001 by mines or unexploded ordnance, according to U.N. figures. Badly injured victims continue to pour into hospitals. In Mirwais Hospital in Kandahar, 11 people - including four children - were treated for mine injuries in August alone.

Afghanistan's wars left an estimated 5 million to 10 million mines littering the country, most of them left by the Soviets during their 10-year occupation of the country.

Von: By PAMELA SAMPSON The Associated Press, 09/19/02 01:36 EDT

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