Since 1954, the Greek army has employed its Land Mine Clearance Squad (TENX) to systematically clear mines from practically every district in Greece, achieving significant results. So far, 135,000 anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines, and 125,000 projectiles of all types have been located and destroyed, and 11,600 hectares of land have been made safe for normal use.

In 2000 alone, 1.8 million square meters of land were investigated, and 13,600 land mines and 6,000 shells of different sizes were recovered. But the army’s mine clearance squad still has plenty of work ahead of it. Grammos, Viti, Smolikas, Mourgana and Tomaros, an area of 40,000 hectares, where fierce battles took place in 1947-49 between the rebels’ Democratic Army and the National Army, still contain mines and other equally dangerous munitions.

Today, everywhere The rebels set up minefields everywhere to halt the advance of the infantry. They set traps made of explosives and, when they abandoned their strongholds in 1949, they left behind them mined areas for which there are no maps for the army squad to use today to find the mines.

According to data from TENX, some 900 hectares in this area are still suspected to contain mines dating back to the war. Clearing the Grammos range of mines is not an easy task, though the clearance squad has accomplished a great deal, mainly by destroying mines left by the National Army. The contours of the land, dense vegetation, landslides, erosion and, above all, the lack of maps pinpointing the location of the mines, make the process arduous and highly dangerous.

When the rebels had no mines, they invented their own explosive mechanisms that were just as deadly as the mines, and placed them wherever they expected their enemies to go. Hundreds of victims

For this reason it is still not safe for anyone crossing the slopes of Grammos and the other mountains of western Macedonia and Epirus. Hundreds of unsuspecting people: hunters, livestock farmers, gold diggers, foresters and illegal migrants have been killed or mutilated by abandoned mines and shells, not only on Mt. Grammos but throughout the whole area, wherever fighting occurred during the occupation and the civil war. Local people and agencies have plans for developing mild forms of tourism on Grammos, one of the most beautiful mountains in the country, so as to bring some economic relief to this almost deserted border region but they come up against the problem of the uncharted minefields.

In contrast, Mount Pindus and the Rhodope region on the Greek-Bulgarian border have been cleared of mines. During the Cold War, in keeping with NATO plans for dealing with the perceived threat from the north, the Greek army squad thousands of anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines from Lake Doirani to Echino, Xanthi, just as Bulgaria had done on account of the Warsaw Pact.

The Eastern Bloc collapsed and the danger ceased to exist, the Greeks and Bulgarians agreed to destroy the border minefields. From 1997 to 2001, TENX cleared nearly the entire Greek-Bulgarian border area of mines. The Belles minefield, where the two soldiers were killed early last week, was one of the few remaining fields scheduled for clearance soon. Mine-clearers worked to help make the Attiki Odos; they cleared part of Mt. Hymettus of buried projectiles and ammunition.

Recently, to facilitate work on the highway near the Rio tollgates, TENX dug up an entire minefield left there by German occupation forces. The Grammos mine clearance experts were more than happy to help.

TENX is constantly in contact with death It is probably the only army unit that has been at war since it was founded. The men in TENX are constantly in contact with death: One false move and they lose their lives. The enemy they have to deal with doesn’t joke and never misfires. The TENX unit has already paid a heavy price in blood; since the unit’s formation in 1954, 31 bomb disposal experts have lost their lives. "Our job is extremely dangerous; your first mistake is your last," TENX chief, Lieutenant-Colonel Giorgos Kasidokostas told Kathimerini. "The men in our unit are very professional, highly trained and experienced, and they have ultra-modern equipment to make their work as safe as possible.”

Safety regulations are religiously adhered to during mine clearance. Once the metal detectors locate a mine, everything else is done by hand. The expert checks the mine with his fingertips to make sure it is not booby-trapped and ready to explode the moment it is picked up. Seconds seem like hours. The task requires coolheadedness, concentration and no abrupt movements. The enemy is unpredictable.

Mines might also be affected by time and humidity which could make them explode unexpectedly. The men work in teams of two. While one disables the mine, the other stands at a distance of five meters. Every 15 minutes they change places to avoid fatigue which can cause accidents. "Don’t touch" Kasidokostas explains that not only mines are dangerous for the lay person, but also hand grenades, and booby-trapped shells and guns. His advice to non-experts who find mines or ammunition is: "Don’t touch or inspect it. Move away at once and advise the nearest police or army authority, who will collect it." Asked why the team does not explode mines when they locate them so as to avoid any risk to human life, Kasidokostas explains, "We respect the property of others and private property. Blowing up a mine can destroy a whole area.” He also stresses his unit’s contribution to society by clearing and handing over mine-free areas which can then be used.

One hundred million mines scattered around the world United Nations officials calculate that there are around 100 million land mines scattered around more than 60 countries, which are either at war or have been at war in the past. For every 12 children, they note, there is one mine. In Afghanistan alone, there are said to be some 10 million mines left behind after the war with the Soviets, while countries such as Somalia, Angola, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, Vietnam and Rwanda are teeming with land mines.

A land mine is a cheap and treacherous weapon which usually kills civilians. The case of Cambodia is horrifying: In a country of 9 million people, one in 250 has been maimed by a land mine. Yet this is hardly surprising, when one considers that the wars with the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge have left 11 million mines in their wake.

UN sources say that in the last 35 years more than 1 million people around the world have been killed or injured by mines, and another 150 are killed every day. Land mines are easily transported and positioned, and they almost never misfire. More than 50 types of anti-personnel mines are available on the market, and the range continues to grow. The problem is that they cost no more than three dollars apiece to buy and $1,000 to disable does not bother those who use them in the least, even when they lay mines in their own country where their own children might be killed. The global outcry against the use of land mines has led to international agreements to ban them. The most recent of these, the Ottawa Convention, was ratified by most countries except for the USA, Russia, Israel and Turkey, bans the use, development, transport and storage of anti-personnel mines. Greece signed this convention, which went into force in May, 1999, but with some reservations about the Greek-Turkish border, since Turkey had not signed. Despite these agreements, however, land mines are in use and continue to be manufactured. The only difference is that a new generation of mines is made according to modern specifications which are not covered by the bans.
