Arab Emirates dismantles 30,000 landmines in South Lebanon

Beirut (Lebanon) - The UAE Armed Forces have dismantled more than 30,000 landmines in southern Lebanon as they push ahead with a clearance operation ordered by President His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan to neutralise the hidden devices which have claimed hundreds of lives in the troubled region.

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Sheikh Zayed, declaring his commitment to the safety of the Lebanese people, donated $50 million to finance the mine-clearing effort, codenamed "Operation Emirates Solidarity" and officials described the donation as a unique initiative.

The operation, which was launched in late 2001, has also received plaudits from the United Nations.

Staffan de Mistura, the UN secretary general's personal representative in Lebanon, said: "We are truly fortunate to have this commitment from the United Arab Emirates as it will accelerate the de-mining process. What could have taken decades should be finished in just a few years.

"It is unusual to find a single donor who could so dramatically influence the course of freeing populations from the threat of landmines."

In a report from south Lebanon published in the monthly bulletin Dira Al Watan, the Armed Forces General Command said its explosives experts were working in collaboration with the Lebanese Army, the United Nations and other experts in the field of mining clearance.

The operation is beset with dangers given the mountainous nature of the area, as well as the presence of many types of mines, some more than 50 years old.

There is also concern that Israel is refusing to hand over any minefield maps it may have made during its occupation of southern Lebanon before being driven out more than three years ago.

However, the Lebanese report said that units were attempting to avert risk by using laser technology, remote sensing equipment and automated devices, to help them dismantle or detonate anti-personnel and anti-armour mines.

"One of the obstacles facing our units is the absence of maps about the minefields. Israel appears to be keeping those maps while others supplied to our forces on that area are not very accurate," said Khaled Shuhail, the UAE's acting ambassador in Lebanon.

"But our units are doing their best to overcome those obstacles by using advanced equipment and by co-ordinating with the Lebanese army, the UN and explosives experts from some foreign companies."

Since the operation was launched in October 2001, the UAE explosives experts have cleared more than 30,000 anti-personnel mines of various types in an area of nearly 3.3 million square metres. The area covers 137 land plots and fields, which all have been handed back to their Lebanese owners while 13 other plots will be handed over shortly.

About 424 anti-tank mines, mostly placed by Israeli forces, have also been removed in areas close to the border and in towns such as Wazani, Qantara, Bayyadha and Marwahin.

Citing military intelligence information, the report said there are nearly 299 minefields in the area assigned to the UAE Armed Forces in southern Lebanon, containing at least 55,000 anti-personnel mines and 3,450 anti-tank mines.

In the areas along the border, there are an estimated 846 minefields containing more than 254,000 anti-personnel mines and 4,230 anti-armour mines.

There are an estimated 28 types of mines, of which more than 90 per cent are Israeli-made. The rest include French, British, American and Russian mines, some of which have been left since World War II and subsequent wars in the region.

"A total of more than 400,000 mines are believed to be planted in south Lebanon. They have disrupted the lives of the residents there and made them live in fear for a long time. Since May 2000, mines have claimed 190 lives," it said.

The report said the operation would continue until all mines are cleared on orders by Sheikh Zayed, the Supreme Commander of the Armed forces.

An officer from the UAE Armed Forces said: "It is a beautiful concept that we are killing these killer devices and planting a smile on the faces of
We are killing these killer devices and planting a smile on the faces of these people, who have been deprived of a smile for years. When they watch us work, we can see the delight in their eyes.

“What we are doing here is not a mere military operation but a humanitarian one, we are restoring these people’s dreams.”

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