Sriganganagar (India) - During the 15-16 months of the military mobilisation since December 2001, land mines claimed 113 victims: 29 died and 84 suffered injuries in just one district of Rajasthan.

(13.07.2003)

What were young Sukhwinder's last minutes like, his grieving family members keep asking themselves. The 10-year-old son of Roop Singh, a resident of 63F (the name based on the location of settlement on the Gang canal network) in district Sriganganagar, died in land mine explosion on May 31, 2003 his hands blown off, his belly ripped open, the intestines spilling out.

That morning Sukhwinder had taken goats for grazing. He took the herd around, going across the pond near his home. The rest of his family went about their chores. But within minutes, there was an explosion. Everyone rushed out, to find the boy's shattered frame lying face down near a tree.

They picked him up and rushed him to the hospital at tehsil headquarters in Sri Karanpur. Lacking facilities for treatment, the hospital referred him to the district hospital at Sriganganagar. By the time the villagers reached there, Sukhwinder was dead.

It was an accident that few had foreseen. The boy died at a place located outside the area that was mined by the Army. Moreover, even the mined area had been declared safe by the Army in April when it completed demining and withdrew, handing over fields to villagers.

But this was not an isolated incident. In two months since demining was completed, half a dozen incidents involving land mines, resulting in one death and injuries to four persons, have been reported in this border district alone.

During the 15-16 months of the military mobilisation since December 2001, land mines claimed 113 victims: 29 died and 84 suffered injuries in just one district of Rajasthan, Sriganganagar. The dead include three children and four women. Three Army personnel were killed. Among the injured were 15 children, four women and four Army men.

There were even agricultural losses due to land mines of over Rs 50 crore in the first year. No crops were sown in the seasons that followed. The district administration said it had asked for a compensation of Rs 1.5 crore for the last season. Nothing of that has yet come, according to the district administration. Compensation to the victims has not arrived either. The government had announced a compensation of Rs 2.5 lakh for the family of the deceased and between Rs 1 lakh and Rs 2 lakh for the injured, depending on the extent of disability suffered. Meanwhile, land mine accidents continue.

In reply to an unstarred question in the Lok Sabha in May 2002, the Government said that mine laying was always a hazardous task and casualties were acceptable even in training. The Government also said that in spite of all precautionary measures taken by the Army, civilian casualties did occur in mine accidents when they entered fenced mine fields to tend to their crops or in pursuit of livestock. But it added that details of all civilians killed in land mine blasts were not separately maintained.

Under international law, causing harm to civilians or civilian objects is a war crime. It perhaps provides a remedy of sorts when hostilities break out between two countries, but does not apply to cases such as this. Many died, several others were deprived of their means of livelihood due to military action without a war. The victims of anti-personnel mines laid on Indian territory were Indians, both civilians and combatants.

The mining exercise caused large-scale dislocation and villagers returning home cannot be sure that their fields and grazing pastures have been entirely demined. That is even though in many places the Army ran tanks over fields to show the villagers that the land was now safe. But many land mines still remain.

The post de-mining scenario is in some ways more dangerous than earlier, when the minefields were demarcated and fenced off. Now there is no barrier, no warning sign. It was reported that even according to the Army's estimates, 20 per cent of land mines that were laid could not be detected during de-mining - the Army had reportedly conceded that the task was not complete as yet.

On May 25, in Khakha village under Hindumal Kot police station, Gurdev, 13, was playing with his six-year-old brother Sukhdev Singh and cousin Beant Singh, 6. They found a metallic object and were fiddling with it when it went off. It made a deep wound in Gurdev's palm while its splinters sprayed the forearms of the two younger boys.

Dara Singh, Beant's father, said it was a fuse used to detonate land mines.

Villagers of 63F have not resumed farming yet. According to them, the BSF, which took over when the Army left, after handing over the fields to their
which took over when the Army left after handing over the fields to their owners, told them they did not think the fields were still safe for cultivation.

On the very first day that Om Prakash of 7F, drove his tractor over his fields to begin cultivation on May 27, he hit an anti-personnel mine that blew up the front tyre of the vehicle. Land mines were also found in the fields of his neighbour Kartar Singh, he says.

Land mines, once laid, are extremely difficult to detect. Sevak Singh of Hakam Singh Ki Dhani found one when he was ploughing the fields with his tractor. "I had become confident and relaxed since I had already worked the fields with my tractor thrice earlier," he said. Luckily, the land mine did not go off as it had not come under the wheels.

Gurmeet Singh of Khakha village in Hindu Mai Kot, Sriganganagar district was not so lucky. He had already tilled the land, watered it thoroughly and hired the tractor of a panchayat member, Mahendra Singh, for seeding. He was following the tractor when a land mine came under one of rollers in the tractor's attachment at the rear. The roller was blown off and some splinters hit Gurmeet in the belly.

On May 19, an anti-tank mine was found in the fields of Hanuman Sharma of Lakkha Tibba village in the Raisinghnagar area of Sriganganagar. The Army had de-mined the area some time ago. It had also run tanks over the fields for the villagers' satisfaction before handing over the fields to them. The anti-tank mine escaped all this and turned up in the soil even before the tracks left by tanks disappeared. The villagers informed the police. Army experts were called in and the mine removed and destroyed the next day. There was no mishap, but this was enough to spread a scare among the people of the area.

Von: 13 July 2003, Hindustan Times. All rights reserved. By Rajesh Sinha.