Cluster bomb "duds" leave behind a minefield

The Saddam Hussein regime was brought to an end, but the war is not over, nor will it be for a long time for many Iraqi civilians, particularly children, due to the left-over deadly weapons used in the war, a crucial issue in the post-war era, warn specialists.

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The 750 Tomahawk missiles and the 18,000 bombs fired in the first 21 days of the conflict by the U.S.-British coalition against Iraq took a considerable toll, killing many civilians, though it is still impossible to know exactly how many.

The initial counts of civilian casualties reached 1,300, but the true number could be much higher, and will continue to rise as the Iraqi population faces the threat of undetonated cluster bombs, or "duds", as occurred in the wake of the wars in Kosovo (1999) and Afghanistan (2001).

Despite the exhortations of U.S. civil society groups months before the war began, the United States armed forces utilized cluster bombs, which release hundreds of smaller, lethal "bomblets", often claiming civilian lives. These devices can remain embedded in the ground for years, turning into de facto anti-personnel mines.

The Pentagon (U.S. Department of Defence) acknowledged on Apr. 2 that it had used cluster bombs in the city of Al Hillah, 80 km south of Baghdad. The International Committee of the Red Cross reported dozens of civilians dead and 300 injured as a result of that attack.

According to the international press reporting from within Iraq, cluster bombs were used in military operations throughout the country.

Cluster bombs date back to the 1960s and, as a standard element of the military arsenal, were extensively utilized in the Vietnam War (1965-1975), the 1991 Gulf War, as well as in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Experts estimate that more than 10,000 cluster bombs were released during Operation Desert Storm, 1,200 in Kosovo and 600 in Afghanistan.

Patrick Garret, a defence and security analyst at the Washington-based GlobalSecurity.org, explained to Tierramerica that there are different types of cluster bombs but they all function in much the same way.

A projectile-shaped container carries smaller weapons, or submunitions. When it is released during a bombardment operation the canister opens and disperses the bomblets over a broad area, depending on the altitude from which it is dropped, according to Garret. The area of impact can cover an area as extensive as two football fields.

These mini-bombs are designed as anti-tank, anti-personnel and anti-material ordnance, or with combined effect, such as fragmentation and incendiary capabilities. They are about the same size as a soft-drink can and may include a small parachute to facilitate their descent.

According to human rights watchdog Amnesty International, the United States used CBU-97 type cluster bombs in the Iraqi city of Al Hillah. Each one includes around 200 BLU97 bomblets, which the Pentagon reports have a five-percent failure or "dud" rate.

In other words, there are some bomblets that do not explode, but sit where they were dropped. Their colorful encasements might attract children, who could confuse them for toys.

During the attack against Afghanistan in late 2001 to overthrow the Taliban regime, the United States issued radio messages and pamphlets to educate the population about how to differentiate between the food ration packages air-dropped as part of the humanitarian aid effort and unexploded ordnance.

Weapons experts, meanwhile, have suggested that the percentage of bomblets that fail to explode on impact could be higher in the field of combat than in the controlled conditions of testing.

“Our experience in the clean-up operations in Kosovo indicate that we could talk about 15 percent (failure rate),” Jose A. Martinez-Lopez, of the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Center (UNMACC), told Tierramerica.

In the first two years following the Persian Gulf War, more than 1,400 Kuwaitis and around 200 Iraqis were killed in incidents related to cluster bomb munitions, according to the British group Landmine Action.

The number of such deaths in Afghanistan is estimated at over 100.

And in Kosovo, 45 percent of the victims of explosive devices can be attributed to the bomblets, so far totalling 103 dead and 372 injured since the conflict there ended, says Martinez-Lopez.
These munitions can also have negative effects on the environment. In Afghanistan, according to the U.N., an 800-square-km area, covering farmland, pastures, irrigation channels and residential areas, has been contaminated by ordnance.

U.N.-led clean-up operations in Afghanistan are aimed at protecting some 170,000 civilians, reducing the number of refugees and recovering the land. If successful it could save the country some $730 million.

According to GlobalSecurity.org’s Garret, it is still too soon to know to what extent the use of cluster bombs will impact Iraq in the long term. He said the U.S. Central Command has reported that it has mostly used precision control weapons.

Pentagon officials say that the cluster bombs dropped in Iraq are more precise in reaching their targets because new technology permits them to compensate for external factors, such as wind speed.

Cluster bombs are not officially categorized as anti-personnel devices and so are not covered by the 1999 Convention on Landmines, which bans their use.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and civil society organizations are demanding a moratorium on cluster bombs until their failure rate and margin of error can be further reduced. Some groups are calling for including the devices in treaties that would ban their use entirely.

“The international community established accords on nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, but today’s conventional weapons can be as devastating as the so-called weapons of mass destruction,” says Ricardo Aguilar, director of Spain’s Center for Peace Research.

The issue of the destructive power of new types of weapons in the civilian arena is crucial in the post-war debate, say experts.

“Countries must set up mechanisms for evaluating arms that are in development. These assessments today are secret. The ICRC is demanding transparency,” said Dominique Loye, adviser on weapons and international humanitarian law for the Geneva-based ICRC.

“After the hostilities, the degree of violations must be evaluated in the legal context that seeks to prevent armies from resorting to just any method to eliminate the enemy,” Loye told Tierramerica.

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