

Cluster bombs leave 'toys' that kill children (Lebanon)

South Lebanon is littered with thousands of unexploded cluster bombs. They are smaller and deadlier than hand grenades, and they lie where they fall in homes, gardens and trees, threatening communities for months or even years to come. The United Nations has confirmed 285 Israeli cluster bomb strikes in south Lebanon.

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Hala Jaber, Yuhmur, South Lebanon

AFTER 34 days of war that confined them to one shelter after another, three children almost lost their lives last week when they returned to their devastated village and went outside to play, oblivious to the cluster bombs around them.

Marwa al-Miri, 10, and her cousins Sikna, 12, and Hassan, 10, skipped between the ruined houses of Aita al-Shaab in a game of treasure hunt, then heard a macabre rumour and decided to investigate.

"We were going to see my grandfather's house. We were told there was Israeli blood from the fighting and we wanted to see it," Sikna explained.

Suddenly a strange object caught Sikna's eye. It was small, round and metallic, with a tip that looked like a cigarette end. She picked it up to show her cousins.

Marwa and Hassan remembered warnings not to touch strange objects. "It's one of those bombs," one of the children cried. Sikna panicked and dropped the cluster bomb, which exploded instantly.

"Hassan was flung about two to three metres and I flew to the other side," she said, speaking slowly in her hospital bed. "I was on the ground with blood coming out of my stomach and I started to cry and scream. My stomach was making a funny noise as if it was whistling."

Doctors discovered later that shards of metal had penetrated her liver. While Marwa received relatively minor injuries, Hassan was wounded in the abdomen.

"My intestine came out and I held it and began to run, shouting 'Allahu Akbar' (God is greatest)," said Hassan. "I collapsed, my uncle picked me up and they took us to hospital."

Like Sikna, he spent two days in intensive care. Both children are struggling to comprehend what happened. "They left us toys that will kill us," said Hassan blankly.

The war in Lebanon may be over but villages across the south are reverberating every day to the sound of explosions.

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Cluster munitions from artillery strikes spray small bombs over a wide area and 25% fail to explode on impact. The United Nations has confirmed 285 Israeli cluster bomb strikes in south Lebanon.

The small bombs have killed eight people, including two children, in the 13 days since the ceasefire. According to Sean Sutton of the British-based Mines Advisory Group (MAG), half of nearly 40 villages inspected in the Nabatiyeh region are strewn with them.

In Yuhmur, a village five miles from the Israeli border, the situation is desperate, Sutton said. "The whole village is highly contaminated, including all the houses and gardens." Only 30% of the inhabitants have returned; the rest are waiting to hear that their homes have been cleared.

Magnus Rundstrom, MAG's team leader in Yuhmur, was directing four de-miners slowly and meticulously through each house. Banana plantations and olive groves must wait until later, although the delay means no harvest this summer.

"In one house alone we found three empty containers that had already unleashed their bombs in the vicinity," Rundstrom said.

In the garden of another, 24 were detected and blown up.

Four clearance teams from MAG have made safe more than 1,000 small bombs in the last week, and many more lie ahead. Teams from the Lebanese army and Hezbollah are also in action.

A Hezbollah fighter who had cleared 65 cluster bombs from the same village died last Tuesday when one blew up as he packed them into a box. In the nearby town of Tibnin, three Lebanese army soldiers were killed the following day after clearing 210 bombs from around a hospital.

Tekimiti Gilbert, operations chief of the UN Mine Action Co-ordination Centre in Lebanon, said he had "no doubt" that Israel's use of cluster bombs had violated international law prohibiting their use in civilian areas.

Israel denies using them illegally, saying it had to defend itself against Hezbollah fighters in Lebanese towns and villages firing rockets that killed Israeli civilians.

The US State Department opened an investigation last week into whether Israel's use of American-made cluster bombs violated an agreement that they would not be used in civilian areas.

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