Decades after war, landmine keep killing (Zimbabwe)

Harare - Rumbidzai Zulu, a woman in her early twenties, stares at the freshly bandaged stump that used to be her leg. A landmine blew off the limb while she was looking for firewood in the bush - also claiming the life of her unborn child - and she is struggling to come to grips with the trauma.

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Hundreds of people have been killed, maimed or injured by mines which were planted by government troops and their opponents in the 1970s, during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. A toll has also been taken on domestic and wild animals.

It is estimated that Zimbabwe is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world, its borders with Mozambique and Zambia being virtually impassable in certain stretches.

Anti-personnel mines used by authorities in what was then Rhodesia included the R2m2, RAP Carrot, M972 and VS50 devices, which were strategically planted to deter rebel fighters from crossing into the country from surrounding states.

Twenty years later, the mines continue to wage war against unwitting civilians.

According to de-mining analysts, over 500 million U.S. dollars are needed to conduct a comprehensive clearance exercise along the borders. However, Zimbabwe's cash-strapped government lacks the funds to provide even basic healthcare to its citizens - and de-mining appears certain to remain on the back burner for some time to come.

In addition, a new battle - the political war of words between Zimbabwe and donor countries - has badly affected clearance operations.

Relations between Harare and several developed countries have been strained since the start of farm occupations in Zimbabwe in 2000. Reports of ongoing human rights abuses at the hands of officials and government-backed militias have deepened tensions, as have claims that parliamentary and general elections were marred by violence and vote-rigging.

The Director-General of Operations and Planning in the Ministry of Defence, Trust Mugoba, says Washington has withdrawn funding for de-mining projects in the northern areas around Victoria falls and Binga.

"Unfortunately, the military has not been spared by the politics between Zimbabwe and the United States Government. The U.S. government stopped funding for the de-mining project project in 2000."

According to Mugoba, the U.S. had contributed five million dollars to the project since the 1990s, which resulted in several kilometres of land being cleared of mines. It also trained 120 engineers from the Ministry of Defence and provided funding for equipment and machinery used in the de-mining process. The European Union has also withdrawn funds for mine clearance.

As a result of the danger posed by landmines, large tracts of arable land remain largely uncultivated - a profound irony in a country so marked by disputes around land ownership and availability.

A communal farmer from the Dande Valley that lies along Zimbabwe's border with Mozambique, Brain Mutsago, told IPS that people there lived in fear of the anti-personnel mines. "It is a dangerous thing to try to cultivate in the area, as one can be blown up in any time," he said.

Jennifer Cohen, Director of Operations for Mine-Tech - Zimbabwe's only private company specializing in mine clearance, saw the progress she
A private company specializing in mine clearance says the weapons also continue to pose a danger to people who cross the country's borders illegally. Mine-tech's expertise has been used in operations in neighbouring Mozambique - as well as Angola, Kosovo and Sri Lanka.

The landmine problem was exacerbated two years ago after rains induced by cyclone Eline caused many devices to be unearthed.

The plight of mine victims in Zimbabwe may be highlighted at the Nairobi Summit on a Mine Free World, which takes place at the end of November and beginning of December this year.

This conference will review the progress made in implementing the 1997 Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction - the so-called Mine Ban Treaty.

Zimbabwe is a signatory to this agreement, which entered into force in March 1999. The convention has set 2009 as the date by which countries that had endorsed it in 1999 should have completed mine clearance. Over 140 states have signed up to the Mine Ban Treaty - although the United States, China and Russia have yet to come on board.

According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), a Washington-based group that has played a leading role in pushing for mines to be outlawed, up to 20,000 mine-related casualties are reported every year - with most victims being civilians (children account for 23 percent of the casualties). Many wait years before being given the artificial limbs that will allow them to resume a relatively normal life.

However, the ICBL also notes that that over 50 million stockpiled mines have destroyed in recent years. The group was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 for its efforts to combat the scourge of landmines.

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