Deminers warn it will take years to clear bitter legacy of Iraq wars (Iraq)

Iraq - Deminers say it will take years to clear the hundreds of tons of unexploded ordnance, from cluster bombs to anti-air missiles, that litter residential areas across Iraq.

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"What we find here is more dangerous than landmines which can kill one or two people each. Missiles can kill loads," said Roger Hess from the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action, an organization contracted by the United Nations to help clear Iraq of unexploded ordnance (UXO) and mines.

Hess, who works with international and local Kurdish staff, estimated it would take between 18 and 24 months to ensure civilians will no longer be in contact with UXOs.

"But it will take between six and seven years to destroy them all."

Hess and other deminers said the latest war did not see a proliferation of landmines, unlike the 1991 Gulf War and the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War.

He said boys, typically aged nine to 13, are among those most likely to get hurt by UXOs as they often mistake them for toys.

"The real challenge is that we can't tell them 'don't touch and call the authorities' because there is no government here," he said.

But NGOs such as Handicap International are trying to fill the gap with UXO and mine awareness programs alongside their demining activities.

"We distribute leaflets and posters in schools, mosques and hospitals," said the head of operations in Iraq, Damien Vallette D’Osia.

"The suffering of victims of war is only beginning. We're looking to provide medical and psychological assistance," he said, pointing to a program to fit up to 300 people with artificial limbs and offer local medics training in psychology.

The US-led occupation administration has also set up its own demining program, relying on a Mozambican team working for the US-based, private company Ronco, which is used by the State Department worldwide.

A spokesman said US and British troops were also disposing of UXOs but only those they found in their path or as part of their weapon confiscation program.

"Humanitarian demining is not done for any tactical military purposes, it is done for civilians," said Pearse Marschner, describing Ronco’s job.

"Sixteen years of civil war in Mozambique gave us a lot of experience in demining, although what we found here are mostly UXOs," said Elton Pinheiro, one of the deminers working in the Baghdad area.

He said Ronco’s other team was based in Hilla, south of Baghdad, and exclusively dealing with landmines.

"Our working hours are shortened by the heat here," said Fernando Junior, another deminer, expressing concern that Iraq’s blistering summer heat, only a month away, "would destabilize some UXOs and may set them off."

As he was touring UXOs-infested sites in Baghdad, Hess faced the locals’ ire for not having cleared the area sooner.

"You came last week and you said the missile would go. Look, it's still here and we're scared!" said Abdullah Hattab, 68, pointing at a Russian-made ground-to-air SA-2 missile on a launcher, right by his house in the Al-Baladiat neighborhood in southwest Baghdad.

The US army says at least 131 such missiles still dot the capital.

"It will be cleared out within a week. I did not have the equipment nor the personnel but they've arrived now," explained Hess as the old man calmed down and flashed a big smile.

Other residents expressed fears that the missile would go off under Iraq’s blazing sun.

"It could cook off and blow up or its liquid fuel could leak," said Hess.

"This fuel, inhibited red fumic nitric acid, is deadly if people breathe it in. It can also lead to deep burns if they touch it."

Saleh, seven, who had deep blisters on his face and right hand, and Hussein, another seven-year-old whose leg was badly burnt, said they were injured when they came close to yellow fumes emanating from yet another SA-2 missile in Al-Baladiat.