Explosive Devices Take Their Toll on Children

Improvised explosive devices and landmines left behind in current skirmishes between Nepal's security forces and rebel Maoists are posing a great risk to Nepali children, whose innate curiosity and need for play often lure them directly into harm's way.

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Five children, three of them as young as six, died in the western district of Rukum on Apr. 10 while approaching an improvised grenade left behind after a fierce 15-hour gun battle between security forces and Maoists in Khara - a rebel stronghold.

Two weeks later, six children, including a five-year-old, were severely injured when an improvised bomb left behind by Maoists in a house in Jamune, also in a western district, exploded on them.

On both the occasions the children mistook the improvised explosives for something far more benign.

More than 11,000 Nepalis have died since the Maoists launched a "people's war" in 1996 to establish a one-party communist republic in the impoverished Himalayan kingdom.

Nepal's monarch, King Gyanendra, seized power on Feb. 1 after he said squabbling politicians failed to end the increasingly bloody insurgency. On Apr. 30, however, the king ended the emergency rule he imposed when he took over.

The Nepal branch of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines says the organisation has recorded around 500 deaths caused by improvised explosive devices and mines since the rebels took up arms in 1996. More than 100 of the victims were civilians and a quarter of them children.

Of some 900 wounded, nearly one third were civilians.

"Children are naturally curious about strange objects. To them, many of these explosive devices that either kill or maim them look simply like toys," Arjoo Deuba, of the NGO Sahara, told IPS. Shara is currently working in more than a dozen of Nepal's 75 districts to assist children affected by the insurgency.

"Most unfortunately, children end up becoming victims of these mines and improvised explosives," added Deuba.

Nepal is not among the 134 countries that have ratified the 1997 Ottawa Protocol that requires governments not to use landmines.

In a statement to the United Nations in October 2002, Nepal's permanent representative, Murari Raj Sharma, said, Nepal was opposed to anti-personnel landmines, but he kept short of pledging commitment to the ban.

"When the time is ripe," he said, "we will be happy to join the ranks of those that have the privilege of becoming a party to that very important global treaty."

Royal Nepal Army spokesman Deepak Gurung told the 'Nepali Times' that mines were the only defence from the rebels for soldiers in their barracks and camps.

"In a war like this where hundreds of guerrillas try to storm a base manned by a few soldiers, mines are the only defence," he stressed.

The army at present uses anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines made in China, India and Russia.

The favourite among the Maoists rebels is the wire-detonated pressure cooker packed with explosives to target passing military vehicles. Children are fascinated by this improvised explosive device because of the stainless steel pressure cooker. In rural areas where pots and pans are made of clay, a pressure cooker might seem god-sent.

Despite a growing body of evidence of the widespread use of landmines and improvised explosive devices by both security forces and the rebels, organisations like Sahara and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) worry that the issue is not getting the due attention that it deserves.

One reason could be because deaths and injuries from these devices are scattered.

"The estimated number of deaths and injuries in Nepal from mines and explosive devices is still comparatively small when compared with 40 children that die each day just from diarrhoea, for example," said Duomi Sakai, who heads UNICEF Nepal.

"But UNICEF and our partners are still concerned about this new threat to children and their families, not in the least because this new threat will last for decades after the conflict is over, and will still be killing children," she added.

Afghanistan, Angola and Cambodia have suffered 85 percent of the world's land-mine casualties. Overall, Africa is the most mined continent, with an estimated 37 million mines embedded in at least 19 countries.

There are no humanitarian de-mining programmes in Nepal, though the Royal Nepal Army reportedly removed mines in 25 districts during the seven-month ceasefire with the Maoists in 2003.

"In Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam," said Sakai, "children and their families are still being blown up by explosives, remnants of wars fought more than 30 years ago."

But still, stepping off the beaten path in Nepal could prove to be fatal.

On 11 April, a taxi carrying two Russian trekkers hit a landmine in the east of the country, leaving the pair alive but seriously injured.