According to UNICEF anti-tank mines are causing serious problems

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As a 12-year-old boy Hagos Tesfamariam harboured modest ambitions. “I always wanted to be a shepherd,” he said from his village of May Libo. “I was good at that.” Now his dreams are shattered - a victim of one of the deadliest and cruelest legacies of the Ethiopia-Eritrea war. Hagos lost both his legs to a landmine months after the politicians called for a ceasefire. At least two million landmines litter the countryside along the Ethiopia-Eritrea border. Some say there could be twice that number.

Hagos now watches his friends play from a distance. Although he has a wheelchair it is useless in the harsh, rocky terrain of central Tigray. “I was looking after the cattle and had walked them to where they like to eat,” said Hagos. “Then there was a flash.” Tears well in his eyes and he recalls how his family came running to the scene and found him close to death. He was ferried to hospital after an excruciatingly painful hour-long journey to Enticho, where he remained for three months. His mother Lelemichael, 39, now spends her time looking after Hagos. “It has caused us many problems.”

Ethiopia is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world - some dating back to the invasion by Italian troops in the 1930s and mine clearance has become a critical issue. Families still displaced after the two-year-long conflict refuse to go back to their homes fearful of injury or death. Others who have returned are unable to cultivate their land. Currently the World Food Programme in Tigray is feeding tens of thousands of war-displaced people - many of whom cannot return because of landmines. The United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) have been helping defuse mines but their task is huge. At least a quarter of a million mines have been defused and removed but thousands still remain.

Mines litter the border as snakes for 1,000 kilometres over extremely rugged terrain, making the task even harder. In Hagos’ village, which lies a few kilometres from the border and where an estimated 30,000 mines are buried, removing them has not even started - a year after the peace agreement was signed. As yet local Woreda (district) officials have no date when defusing and removing the devices will actually begin. Two people have been killed and at least 15 injured, Hagos the youngest so far.

Kiros Ruafael, a landmine awareness officer working with the Relief and Development Organisation, a local NGO supported by the United Nations childrens fund (UNICEF), says the devastating effects are not just limited to physical injury. “The psychological impact is enormous,” he said. “Here is a young boy who is now confined to a wheelchair, unable to do many of the things he is used to doing. His schooling has also suffered. Not only that his family now have to spend more time looking after him. These are poor people who relied on this boy to look after animals.” Kios has been working with Hagos since he lost his legs in March 2001. “He is very lucky to be alive. But more lives will be lost unless they start to remove the mines that are here. I don’t know when it will happen.” The worst affected areas for mines are Tigray in the north and Afar in the northeast, both along the border with Eritrea and scene of heavy fighting during the conflict that officially ended in December 2000.

According to a report by UNICEF, who support mine-awareness campaigns in Tigray and Afar, more than 75 percent of victims are children. Last year mines and unexploded ordnance killed 150 people. “There are few parts of the country that have been spared this problem,” Bob McCarthy, from UNICEF’s mine awareness team.

According to UNICEF figures around eight people a month in the Tigray region are victims of landmines. At its height during the war that figure was 42. Much of the mine-awareness-raising sponsored by the organisation take place in schools where children use drama, poetry and role-play to learn about the dangers. “The focus of the education is at the community level,” he added. “The majority of the cases affect children. They are by and large the highest risk group and boys are more at risk than girls - particularly those looking after animals and herding.”

“We are concerned that the whole process of de-mining is slow. We do not underestimate the technical process and the scale is huge but the education loses some of its momentum the longer it takes because people get used to living around mines.” Many are anti-personnel fragmentation mines that cause horrific injuries and are designed to wipe out large groups of soldiers. Blast mines and anti-tank mines are also common. Anti-tank mines are causing problems as some designs do not have metal in them and cannot be easily detected. Most of the mines are Chinese made although Russian, American, Belgian and Yugoslavian mines have also been found, most taken from stocks left over from the civil war that ended in 1991.

The international community has helped with equipment and training programmes to clear mines and Ethiopia now has a team of 240 men awaiting transfer from Addis Ababa to the north to start defusing and removing the devices. The only countries across the world that have similar numbers are war-ravaged places like Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia and Iraq.

The huge numbers in Ethiopia have been blamed on the decades of war -culminating in the conflict with Eritrea. An estimated 250,000 mines were laid during that two-and-a-half year period. At least US $400 million has been approved for Ethiopia’s post-war recovery programme. Of that US $230 million is for reconstruction, helping war-affected people and US $30 for the mine action programme. The USA had been funding an extensive mine clearance programme prior to the war with Eritrea but withdrew when fighting broke out.

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