

Iraq struggles to sweep Saddam's landmine legacy (Irak)

Deadly legacy: there are an estimated 25 million landmines across Iraq.

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Inside an Iraqi clinic close to where Saddam Hussein's henchmen killed thousands of Kurds with poison gas, Azima Qadar waits for a check up of her artificial limb.

Her right leg was blown off by a landmine as she went to tend her family's walnut farm in rural northern Iraq, near the Iranian border, in 1993.

"When it happened, I thought: I'm not going to live long, I'll die soon," said the thin, frail Ms Azima. "Instead, I'm trapped in continuous suffering."

Iraq is littered with an estimated 25 million landmines, the Environment Ministry says. Many lie in areas bordering Iran, a legacy of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war that killed a million people.

Mines claimed 14,000 victims in Iraq between 1991 and 2007, the United Nations Development Program says. More than half died from their wounds. For survivors, life is a daily struggle.

Aged 39, illiterate and unmarried in a culture in which women wed in their early 20s, Ms Azima has few real hopes.

Her father was killed along with thousands of other Kurds during Saddam's 1987-1988 'Anfal' or 'Spoils of War' campaign, when soldiers razed villages and forced thousands into camps.

Ms Azima used to make traditional Kurdish shoes and sell them, but deteriorating eyesight forced her to stop. She wonders how she will support her mother, who also lost a leg to a landmine.

Halabja prosthetic centre is one of six Iraqi-run clinics helping mine victims to walk again in the country's largely autonomous Kurdistan region, which has born the brunt of Iraq's mine accidents. Today, it receives 10 mine victims a month.

It also treats people losing limbs to illness or accidents.

"We usually provide the patient with the artificial limb six months after his accident," said Sattar Fattah, who runs the clinic. "We teach him how to walk again."

'Hidden death'

The Kurdish town of Halabja is better known for a poison gas attack by Saddam's Iraq that killed 5,000 people in 1988. Mr Fattah's father died in that attack and his other family members still suffer from partial blindness.

Standing next to a bar he uses to train amputees how to walk with fake limbs, Mr Fattah lamented he could not do more.

"Unfortunately, we do not have psychiatric therapy," he said, as a man with one leg grabbed the bar to support himself. "We just tell him that life has not ended by his handicap. He should be strong and think of his future."

Child mine victims adjust better to their new limbs than the adults, who struggle to learn to walk again, Mr Fattah said.

At a minefield in the mountainous, rural area of Sharazoor, a red flag marks a spot where 34 mines have been lined up after being recovered from nearby fields. A de-mining team prepares to blow them up with TNT.

All were planted as part of a campaign against Kurdish rebels and have rendered fertile land useless for agriculture.

"They're a hidden death laid by the previous regime. They left, but they left behind secret soldiers that keep on killing," said de-mining team head Jamal Mohammed, before a mine sweeper in the distance detonated one of them with a bang.

Some fields have been swept, others are still going through the painstaking process, many others have yet to be started.

Iraq ratified the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty in August 2007. Since then, the Iraqi government has been working to try to meet its treaty obligations, including destroying mine stockpiles by 2011 and clearing all fields by 2017.

But few think it will be finished on time. In Kurdistan alone, there are 788 square kilometres of mines, and only a sixth of that area has been cleared.

"It is a drop in the ocean," said Twana Bashir, a technical adviser to the government's de-mining program. "We're going to need 35 years to finish if we don't increase capacity."

- Reuters

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