Landmine awareness protects Iraq's children against deadly reminders of war

On 4 April 2008, the United Nations marks the second annual International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action. Here is one in a series of related stories.

(03.04.2008)

AMMAN, Jordan, 3 April 2008 * Thanks to UNICEF-supported Mine Risk Education (MRE), 12-year old Lateef from Kirkuk knows danger can be buried underneath his feet.

"We know about objects that you cannot see but they explode when you touch them," he says. "This is how my cousin lost his hand. We fear these things and we know they are still around us, hiding in the grass."

Landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) represent a major threat to Iraqi children. Three major conflicts in the last 30 years have left deadly reminders: landmines, unexploded munitions and even cluster bombs, a deadly form of sub-munition.

More than 4,000 parts of the country are contaminated, according to a National Landmine Impact Survey in 2006. That makes Iraq one of the most ERW-contaminated countries on earth.

Lives lost and destroyed

The damage caused by landmines in Iraq extends beyond loss of life and limbs. Mines can deprive an entire family of its livelihood, deny access to productive land and undermine freedom of movement, including the delivery of humanitarian relief. At least a quarter of ERW victims in Iraq are children. Child injuries are particularly devastating, destroying lives and making school and games a struggle.

"I feel sad for my classmate Hassan, who lost his hand two years ago in a landmine explosion," Lateef says. "He stands watching from far away because he cannot join us in sports and play. Children in our village cannot walk or play beyond the paved road lest they would step on a landmine and get hurt."

Lateef's village is particularly affected, as it was a former hub of military conflict. Many of Lateef's family members, including his aunt, have lost limbs because of landmines.

Mine Risk Education in schools

For children like Lateef, education is the best defense against injury. UNICEF is working with non-governmental organizations and communities in Iraq to run MRE programmes in the worst-affected areas.

These programmes help children understand how to avoid ERW, and inform them of the warning signs they should watch for.

Children receive MRE information through school lessons and games, as well as advertisements and SMS messages. Some 310,000 children, teachers and parents were reached through this programme in 2007 alone.

"As essential as food"

Sohair, a young chemical engineer, is the team leader of the UNICEF-supported MRE programme in Baghdad. She joined the programme to make a contribution toward rebuilding Iraq.

"I thought it was an obligation to help save many lives by these simple measures," says Sohair, whose work reaches 4,500 children at 21 schools in Baghdad's most risky areas. "Children are able to express their fears which, in turn, helps them drive some of the fearful thoughts and emotions out of their heads and hearts," she adds.

Sohair believes education should be fun, so she helps children learn through drama, art and games. Together, they sing songs, design magazines, write poems and tell stories about the risks of picking up unexploded ordnance.

"I get pleasure from knowing I am helping them have fun as well as maybe saving their lives," says Sohair. "Truly, I find this programme as essential as food for children."


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