Mine clearance resumes along key road (Afghanistan)

Kabul (Afghanistan) - Demining activities have resumed along the highway linking the Afghan capital with the south of the country after extra security measures were put in place following a spate of attacks, the United Nations said on Thursday.

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U.N.-funded demining agencies suspended work on the vital road in late May after a local deminer was killed and at least five people were wounded in a series of attacks.

U.N. spokesman Manoel de Almeida e Silva said demining activities along the vital road, which is currently being repaired, had also accelerated after new technology was used.

The United States, Japan and Saudi Arabia are funding the rebuilding of the 500-km (330-mile) road, currently a bone-jarring 16-hour trip over potholes, dirt and gravel.

The rebuilding of the road is the most important reconstruction project in Afghanistan since President Hamid Karzai took power after the fall of the Taliban.

The United States is keen to complete work on the road by the end of the year, which should reduce journey times to eight hours and could boost trade and reduce insecurity within Afghanistan.

"All demining activities along the Kabul to Kandahar road have resumed," Silva told a regular U.N. news conference, citing the deployment of 700 additional police to patrol the road.

"Additional security measures have been put in place by the local authorities which enabled them to go back to their work," he said. "And the demining activities are moving along at fast pace, thanks to a new technology which is now being used there."

The Mechanical Explosive Dog Detection System (MEDDS) allows samples of areas contaminated by mines or unexploded devices to be collected and examined by sniffing dogs in Kabul.

"Each area from which they take samples is carefully marked using Global Positioning System (GPS) so they know exactly where each sample is found," he said.

"Teams with dogs do go back to manually demine the areas which are shown to be contaminated. When nothing is detected by the dogs, the demining teams know they do not need to clear those areas."

Since the new technology was deployed two weeks ago, deminers have completed work on 100 km (60 miles) along the flanks of the road, working at five times the rate they could in the past.

Mine clearance officials said they hope to be able to use the technology in other parts of Afghanistan, one of the world's most heavily mined countries.

Afghan officials blame Taliban fugitives and followers of renegade Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar for the attacks on deminers.

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