BOSTON, USA - PESHAWAR, Pakistan - As they enter Afghanistan, American troops may discover that the ground beneath their feet holds greater danger than the Taliban forces hunkered down in machine-gun nests or terrorist fighters dug into heavily fortified caves.

(25.10.2001)

Afghanistan is the land of the land mine. No other place on earth is sown more thickly with the treacherous contraptions designed to kill, maim, and demoralize: between 6 million and 10 million antipersonnel and antivehicle mines concealed in every region of the country, according to mine-clearing engineers of the United Nations. Some of the dreaded devices are the size and shape of hockey pucks, meant to rip off a foot or hand with a small blast. Others can reduce an armored personnel carrier to smoldering wreckage in the blink of an eye. The notorious "bounding betty" variety pops a charge into the air that explodes at stomach height, disemboweling its victim.

"These are the cruellest weapons in the world," said Dr. Abdul Aleem, an Afghan physician who knows only too well the awful capabilities of land mines, because he has treated so many victims. "Like snakes of utmost patience, these contrivances are coiled, waiting to strike, in every corner of countryside and cities." They are concealed in farm fields, in roadways, in high mountain passes, in irrigation canals, and in the rubble of shattered cities to await the unwary foot, the plod of a donkey cart, the weight of a car or truck. Thousands of abandoned houses and barns have also been booby-trapped. "The carnage is dreadful," said Richard Daniel Kelly, a former Canadian military engineer who heads the UN's ambitious mine-clearing program in Afghanistan. "They kill farmers as they plant their crops. They kill workers trying to repair roads. They kill the schoolboy who takes a shortcut across a vacant lot."

Soon mines may also be killing Americans, as US special forces take the war against Afghanistan's Taliban to the ground, fighting their way across a terrain where one wrong step can be fatal. "It's a big concern, the threat facing the ground troops," Kelly said. "Unless they come seriously equipped for combat mine clearance, they could become the newest victims of Afghanistan's fields of danger." The Washington-based Center for Defense Information warned in a report last month that American forces - unaccustomed to fighting in regions so saturated with mines - may suffer casualties just trying to move troops or land helicopters. US special forces reconnaissance teams are believed to be operating now in southern Afghanistan. The toll taken by land mines in Afghanistan was hideous long before Washington began its assault earlier this month. Even in ordinary times, 10 Afghans are killed or crippled every day by land mines. Nearly all victims are civilians, and many are children. The verifiable toll is 150 casualties per month, but because so many Afghans live in remote regions where their lives and deaths often go unreported, mine-clearing experts believe the real tally is at least twice as high.

A nightmare situation is now becoming worse, as the US forces continue to pound installations of the Taliban militia and Osama bin Laden's Qaeda terrorist legions. Western attacks, although aimed at military targets, have caused hundreds of thousands of panicked city dwellers to flee into the countryside, according to the UN. "As they travel into unfamiliar regions, they face increasing risks from mines," Kelly said. "There will be more land mine casualties, as these desperate, displaced people fan out across the danger zones." Compounding the long-term problem, some of the US bombs, rockets, and missiles pouring from the skies fail to explode and will pose a hazard to life and limb for decades to come. "Like the land mines, these explosives must be removed," said Peter Le Sueur, a munitions specialist in the Afghanistan mine-clearing program, which has its main offices in Pakistan. "This latest war is pushing our mine-clearing activities backward by years," he said. "Except for emergency removals, ordinary mine-clearing has come to a halt.

"And the new unexploded submunitions - cluster bombs, armor-penetrating projectiles - just mean more dangers for people. An unexploded bomblet can still explode. There will be more casualties, and mine-clearing teams will be facing unfamiliar munitions." Millions of mines were placed in Afghanistan during the 1979-89 war, in which fierce mujahideen routed the Soviet Union's occupation army. Hundreds of thousands more land mines were placed in the civil war that followed and led to the takeover of the country by the Taliban. UN officials say that the Northern Alliance, which is battling the Taliban, has planted even more mines. During more than a decade of work in Afghanistan, UN-trained local sappers earning about $116 a month have located and destroyed more than 15,000 antitank mines, 221,000 antipersonnel mines, and 1.4 million pieces of unexploded ordnance, such as bombs, rockets, and artillery shells, according to the UN. The teams use metal detectors and explosives-sniffing dogs to pinpoint the location of each device. It is a painstaking and risky task.

At least 59 sappers have died in Afghanistan mine-clearing operations in the past decade, and 548 have been seriously injured, although the safety rate has improved greatly in recent years, Kelly said. Small, antipersonnel mines pose the worst danger to civilians. They can be concealed almost anywhere and are employed to terrorize populations by making fields untillable, paths unwalkable, and booby-trapped buildings unusable. They rarely kill outright, but instead blow off a leg or arm. "It is still a death sentence, because so many Afghans have no access to medical treatment, so will die of infection," Aleem said. "Almost as cruel, a mine will kill a poor farmer's ox or donkey, meaning his family must starve because they can no longer plow the field to raise a crop," he said. It has taken a decade to remove most of the mines from 88 square miles of land. Another 283 square miles has been targeted as a priority for clearance.

"Until my country is cleared of mines, we can never be a normal country," said K.M. Sharif, operations officer of the UN Mine Action Program. "Every day, mines are exploding beneath people's feet. We cannot trust the very ground."

© 2016 Landmine.de