Over 8,500 devices removed in second quarter of 2003 (Lebanon)

Beirut (Lebanon) - More than 8,500 land mines were defused in the second quarter of 2003 in Southern areas formerly occupied by Israel, the army announced Monday.

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"As part of a masterplan to de-mine all Lebanese areas, the UAE Solidarity Program, in cooperation with international non-governmental organizations, managed to clear 840,000 square meters of land in the South of 8,504 land mines and explosive ordinances," it said in a statement.

"The army, with the help of the brotherly Syrian Army's engineering unit, also managed to clear another 140,000 square meters of 4,902 land mines and explosive ordinances," the statement added.

Estimates place the number of live explosives planted during the 1975-90 civil war at over 100,000.

The Israeli withdrawal in 2000 and subsequent return of residents have made the extent of existing problems in Southern Lebanon even more evident. An estimated 389,000 land mines planted by the Israeli Army in South Lebanon threatened some 90,000 residents of the former occupation zone.

The continued presence of land mines is not only a danger to residents but also an obstacle to future economic and social development in the region.

Also, the country is littered with land mines dating back to the civil war, especially along former green lines in Mount Lebanon and east of Sidon, but these mines have been largely removed already by the Lebanese and Syrian armies despite the lack of maps indicating where warring militias had planted them.

The figure of 389,000 includes information on the 77,000 mines handed over by Israel in May 2000, according to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

The fluctuation of the number of mines and the shortage of information given to the United Arab Emirates, which has provided a $50 million grant for de-mining activities, prompted the Gulf state to slow down the de-mining project.

The task began in earnest on May 25, 2002, the second anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from the South.

"The army command reiterates its warning to civilians, especially in the south and the Western Bekaa, to avoid approaching suspicious objects and urges them to report to nearby army posts about such bodies," the army's statement said.

Some 95 percent of the total mines left by Israel are located along the Blue Line to a depth of a few kilometers. The Blue Line was demarcated by the United Nations as a reference for the completion of the withdrawal.

Yet Israel is still withholding land mine information, notably for the area north of the Litani River up to Jezzine, the northern limit of the former occupation zone. The area between Kfar Houne and Jezzine was occupied by Israel's now-defunct proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army, from 1985 until 1999.

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