Unexploded Bomblets in Iraq Create 'No Go' Areas That Impede Maneuvers

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Pentagon planners are rethinking how the military uses cluster bombs, because unexploded bomblets littering Iraq significantly impeded American troops' battlefield maneuverability.

Indeed, Marines trying to clean up unexploded ordnance in the Karbala region south of Baghdad say they are finding more deadly cluster bomblets than they expected, which are killing and maiming civilians and complicating U.S. reconstruction efforts.

"It's a big problem, and the military has come to recognize that it's not just a humanitarian problem, it's a military problem," says a senior Pentagon official recently back from Iraq. "You're creating 'no-go' areas on the battlefield. I don't think we appreciated that until this conflict."

At a time of increasingly precise weaponry, cluster bombs are among the most indiscriminate -- and thus controversial -- conventional munitions. Bomblets left over from the first Persian Gulf War killed 1,600 civilians and injured 2,500, according to a Human Rights Watch study. During and after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, they killed or injured at least 129 civilians, the group says.

Though long criticized for civilian cluster-bomb casualties, the Pentagon's current re-evaluation is being driven primarily by a tactical military consideration: Unexploded bomblets render significant swaths of battlefield off limits to advancing U.S. troops.

These bombs also pose a bigger headache for the Pentagon in Iraq because as an occupying power, U.S. troops not only must live amid the danger, but are responsible for the health and well-being of Iraqi citizens -- which involves clearing the ordnance, a United Nations spokesman says.

Cluster bombs are designed to destroy armor and kill troops wide areas. The bombs scatter as many as 900 individually armed bomblets in midair, across a wide area. The U.S. showered between 1 million and 1.5 million bomblets on Iraq during the three-week invasion earlier this year.

The military considers this weapon unsurpassed for attacking massed enemy troops. The trouble comes when the bomblets don't explode, which can happen when they land in soft marshes, sandy deserts or thick foliage.

This bomblet fell through the roof of an animal-feed factory in Imam Awn. Other countries that use cluster bombs have developed technology that limits the number of unexploded munitions, but Pentagon attempts to do so have encountered technical difficulties.

"The military should definitely have been more proactive, particularly when you see what other countries ... have been able to do," says Bonnie Docherty, a Human Rights Watch researcher just back from Iraq.

The Defense Department hopes to start producing bomblets with dud rates of 1% or lower by early 2005, an Army official working on the program says. The Army also plans to equip some cluster bombs with precision-guidance kits to give commanders more control over where the bomblets land. And the Pentagon is taking a look at whether to use them as extensively as it has up to now.

The Pentagon said its tests show that between 2% and 6% of its bomblets don't explode on impact, which it considers acceptable at present. The General Accounting Office has found so-called dud rates as high as 16%, but Army officials call such estimates far too high. Precise rates in Iraq aren't available, but U.S. Marine experts in Karbala say they believe dud rates in some places were as much as 40%.

"It's absolutely overwhelming," says Staff Sgt. Steven Mannon, head of a two-man ordnance-disposal team there. Moreover, they are in places they generally aren't supposed to be. The Pentagon had urged commanders to avoid using them in urban areas to minimize civilian casualties, but some populated areas are littered with unexploded munitions. Marine explosives specialists in the hard-hit Karbala-Hilla area have destroyed more than 31,000 unexploded bomblets -- some Iraqi, most American -- that landed on fields, homes, factories and roads.

Two were on the roof of a downtown hotel, one stuck in its soft tar. Many were in populated areas on Karbala's outskirts. As the Marines prepare to turn over control of the region and the cleanup to multinational peacekeepers Tuesday, commanders say the job is nowhere near done. "There could be 100,000 of the things out there, for all we know," says Capt. George Schreffler, operations officer for the Third Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment.

It is impossible to say how many people have been killed or injured by left over bomblets in Iraq, Unicef officials estimate more than 1,000 children have been wounded since the end of heavy combat by unexploded American and Iraqi munitions of all types.

In the two weeks following Saddam Hussein's fall on April 9, unexploded ordnance killed 23 and wounded 29 in Karbala, according to the city's General Hospital. The hospital hasn't kept track of civilian casualties since then, but bomb-disposal Marines say bomblets killed at least two Iraqis in the past two weeks alone. On July 2, a bomblet exploded during disposal, killing one Marine and seriously wounding another.

Many postwar casualties might have been avoided had the Army equipped the bomblets with self-destruct mechanisms like those used by Britain, Israel, France and Germany, say defense-industry officials. Developed by Israel in the late 1980s, such devices detonate bomblets that survive impact and reduce failure rates to less than 1%. They cost about $12 to $15 each.

The Army began developing what it considered even better self-destruct devices in the late 1990s, but officials say problems making batteries small enough to power them slowed their efforts.

The Army plans to test four different self-destruct devices -- made by both foreign and domestic suppliers -- at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico this week.

Given cluster bombs' inherent danger, the Army official says, "there was a conscious effort by commanders not to use these weapons unless necessary because of the hazard to advancing troops and civilians."

During an April attack on Salman Pak, near Baghdad, Marine ground commanders requested air support and were told they could only get a cluster-bomb-armed B-52. The Marines declined because they didn't want U.S. troops moving into a maze of unexploded bomblets. The Army's Third Infantry Division dropped hundreds of thousands of bomblets on Iraqi troops threatening routes to Baghdad. Later, cluster bomblets forced Iraqi soldiers armed with rocket-propelled grenades and shoulder-fired antiaircraft guns to take cover inside buildings and tanks, allowing helicopters to swoop in and fire precision weapons.

While reluctant to second-guess Army battlefield decisions, many Marines in the Karbala region privately wonder why so many bomblets were dropped in midair.

"These are huge, slow-flying things that have the ability to deliver precision ordnance and inside homes, which of course doesn't lend itself to a stable, occupied environment," says Capt. David Snow, of the Third Battalion.
near civilians. The Marine ordnance-disposal team has found bomblets in date trees, vegetable gardens and inside homes, including closets. "It's a little horrifying to walk into a house and see a family with children living with all these cluster bombs," Sgt. Mannon says.

Marines searching for bomblets just outside Karbala found indications that two U.S. cluster-packed rockets hit the village of Imam Awn, where Iraqi troops were stationed near civilians. Called to the neighborhood repeatedly by panicked locals, the bomb-disposal team has destroyed about 100 bomblets there.

Despite eliminating a number of threats, the Marines encountered a mixed reception. Mohammed Habib, a 42-year-old farmer, stuffed pomegranates and pears into their fatigue pockets after they blew up 10 bomblets in his orchards. But Fahad Toma Abd, 40, fumed at the U.S. military for wounding four of his five children during the invasion. He found 169 bomblets on his farm and had most of them destroyed by an Iraqi free-lancer, who since has lost too many fingers to continue such work. Mr. Abd told the Marines he doesn't dare work his land, and his savings are running out. "The Army should clean up my farm for me, so I can go back to working as a farmer," he said.