

Reported Myanmar Landmine Deaths Double ' Group (Myanmar)

BANGKOK (AFP)--Reported deaths in Myanmar from landmines more than doubled in a year, as both the military government and armed rebel groups continue to lay the lethal ordnance, a monitoring group said Tuesday.

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The Landmine Monitor's 2008 report found that 47 people in Myanmar were killed by mines in 2007, up from 20 people in 2006, while 338 people were injured - 115 more than a year earlier.

"Globally there are very few governments using this weapon any longer - that is not the case in Myanmar," said Yeshua Moser-Puangsuan, research coordinator with global watchdog Landmine Monitor.

He said that Myanmar was one of the only countries in the world where the state was consistently "using them on a widespread basis."

Moser-Puangsuan stressed that the hike in deaths could be the result of better reporting rather than increased use of mines, but said the figure was also likely an underestimation as it did not cover military casualties.

"This is basically a civilian figure. The figure is certainly higher," he told reporters in Bangkok.

Myanmar's junta has for decades been battling insurgencies by armed ethnic rebel groups, mostly in remote border areas.

The military has ruled Myanmar since 1962, often justifying its tight grip on power by insisting that only the generals are able to suppress the rebellions and prevent the nation from splintering.

Civilians are often caught up in the fighting, with human rights groups documenting widespread abuses by the armed forces including torture, forced labor, killings, arbitrary arrest and the destruction of villages.

Human Rights Watch has accused the military of planting mines around rice crops and routes to fields in an effort to hamper the annual harvest, effectively starving civilians off their land in insurgency-hit areas.

Moser-Puangsuan said Landmine Monitor had also received disturbing reports of prisoners being forced to clear landmines "without protective gear, without any training, and sometimes with their bodies alone."

Many rebel groups have reached ceasefire agreements with the junta, but others battle on. The Karen National Union has been waging its insurgency since 1949, and Landmine Monitor said it continued to plant mines.

The group said it also had reports of land mine use by organizations including the Shan State Army - believed to be the largest rebel movement - the Karenni Army, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and the United Wa State Army.

Myanmar is not a party to the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty.

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