Kabul (Afghanistan) - As part of its commitment under the Mine Ban Treaty, Afghanistan has begun destroying stockpiled landmines. In a UN-government joint venture, the first batch of 536 antipersonnel mines and 20 antitank mines were detonated in four massive blasts on Monday to the east of the capital, Kabul.

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"It was aimed at demonstrating Afghanistan's commitment to move forward as quickly as possible with ridding the country of antipersonnel landmines," Dan Kelly, a programme manager of the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan (UNMACA), told IRIN in Kabul.

Afghanistan, which is one of the world's most heavily mined countries, last September became the 144th nation to have signed the 1997 Ottawa convention on banning the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of landmines.

Afghanistan also has one of the highest rates of mine and unexploded ordnance victims in the world. Based on UNMACA estimates, more than 200,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed or injured by mines in the last two decades of war. But progress has been made: over the past five months, mine incidents have fallen from 20 per day to 120 per month, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

So far, 2.8 million explosive devices, including mines and unexploded ordnance, have been cleared from 320 million sq metres of land. But 815 million sq metres of land still have to be cleared to ensure the safe return of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people (IPDs).

"Today's blast was just to indicate that the Afghan government honestly wants to implement the Mine Ban Treaty," Gen Shafi Bahir of the defence ministry told IRIN, noting that the government had identified 49 stockpiles of landmines in Kabul, which would also be destroyed very soon. "As part of a five-year plan, we will demolish the 49 centres in Kabul, and then will launch [an operation for] destroying the stockpiles in the provinces," Bahir said, expressing optimism that the government would be able to destroy most of the stockpiles of mines country-wide within two years.

Despite being largely independent of Kabul, according UNMACA, provincial authorities are generally cooperating on destroying the landmine stockpiles. "We are getting a lot of support from the authorities in the provinces," Kelly said.

He expressed concern, however, that hundreds or thousands of mines remained in the hands of private militias and warlords. "The biggest challenge is these individuals and small groups. We have to speak with them and have dialogue with these people," Kelly said.

The UNMACA is implemented by 15 national and international organisations. About 7,200 Afghans are working in mine-clearance programmes currently. One hundred mine-clearance operatives have been killed and 500 injured since clearance operations started in Afghanistan 13 years ago.

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