Tajikistan begins clearing mines from Afghan border

Tajik sappers began late Thursday to clear mines from a stretch of the Tajik-Afghan border laid by Russian border guards under an agreement during the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war, Tajik officials said.

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Dushanbe -- "We are clearing mines from a segment in the southern Tajik region of Kumsangir, which lies in the zone watched by Russian border guards," the deputy head of Tajikistan's center for mine-related problems, Parviz Mavlonkulov, told AFP.

The area was being cleared in order to restore a water pipe in the area and improve water deliveries to some 90,000 local residents, he added.

Another sapper unit was being sent to the Rasht region in eastern Tajikistan, which saw intense fighting during the civil war, Mavlonkulov said.

Tajikistan remains riddled with around 16,000 mines over a 2,500 square-kilometer (1,000 square-mile) area, anti-landmine organizations say.

Officials here estimate it would take 13.5 million dollars (11 million euros) to clear them by by 2008.

Tajikistan is one of only two former Soviet republics in Central Asia, along with Turkmenistan, to have joined the Ottawa Convention to ban international landmines.

Under a 1993 agreement between Moscow and Dushanbe, some 11,000 Russian and Tajik troops watch over Tajikistan's 1,340-kilometer (830-mile) border with Afghanistan, which produces 77 percent of the world's opium.

Tajikistan announced last April that it would transfer those duties to Tajik-only patrols, with two stretches totalling 500 kilometers (310 miles) of border to be turned over to Tajik border guards by the end of the year.

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