UN unable to defuse cluster bombs

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan - The United Nations Mine Action Programme on Friday admitted its inability to defuse the unexploded cluster bombs being used by the coalition forces in Afghanistan as neither "the conditions neither are conducive nor is their staffs trained for defusing such latest ordnance".

(16.11.2001)

In mid-October, the United Nations Mine Actions programme had asked the US to provide some information about the kind of cluster bombs being used against Afghanistan and the ways to defuse the ordnance in mid-October.

Speaking at a press briefing Friday, Manager of Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan Dan Kelly said the coalition forces are providing some information on locations of strikes, which may contain unexploded ordnance. The UN still has no knowledge of defusing such cluster bombs as some of them are being used the first time.

In an earlier briefing, Dan said the Mine Action Centre Quick Reaction Team in Heart is presently clearing paths for the villagers and sandbagging the devices. "They are doing this so that the villagers can move outside their houses again. They are putting sandbags around the bomb lets for a very good reason: Our de-miners are not familiar with and have not yet been trained to destroy these devices," he told the media.

Dan Friday said the coalition forces have told them as to what is being used and the locations where there is a belief of finding unexploded ordnance. UN Mine Action has manpower of 4,800 people and is being assisted by 15 NGOs. Dan said all of them have to be re-trained. The four and half month training is likely to start in the first week of December in Peshawar and Quetta.

Dan said, "Villagers do have a lot to be afraid of as these bomb lets, if they did not explode on impact, are very dangerous and can explode if touched. About 10% of these kinds of bomb lets can fail to explode." The cluster bombs are like small soft drinks tin in bright and yellow colour and are 268 millimetres long and 64 millimetres in diameter. Each bomb let weighs about one and a half kilogram.

There are normally as many as 200 kinds of bomb lets in a cluster bomb and each one has three effects. The dangerous toy-like bomb let is an anti-vehicle weapon. It has a small shaped charge, which provides the explosive energy to puncture through 125 mm of armoured steel. The bomb let with grooved casing is used as an anti-personnel weapon. Dan said, "When the bomblet explodes, it splits up into hundreds of high velocity pieces of shrapnel each travelling at the speed of a bullet. Finally, the bomb let ignites any combustible material like fuel, ammunition, wood, houses etc in the immediate vicinity."

Dan, however, advised Afghan civilians "not to touch any unfamiliar objects on the ground". To a question, Dan said cluster bombs are technically not part of the international campaign to ban the landmines. "We, the UN, support any or all the international initiatives that will look after the problem of cluster bombs." Dan said the UN strongly advocates that any country or coalition that uses them "provided us the information as to what did they use, where did they use as much as possible, so that we could give any response to that".

UN Mine Action has so far over the 10 years cleared 1.7 million items, 1.5 million of them have been unexploded ordnance, a quarter million anti-personnel mines and about 12,000 anti-tank mines. Still suspected mine areas of 732 million square metres along with another 100 million square meters on the frontlines with Pakistan and Iran is left not cleared.

Dan stated, "I would like to confirm that the coalition force is being cooperative and is providing some information on locations of strikes, which may contain unexploded ordnance. This is very useful information and will be put to good use as an effective response upon our return to Afghanistan."

Von: Source: 10 Nov 01 Sha'baan, By Naveed Ahmad

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