KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN -- Noor Ahmad has one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. For 18 years, he's prodded the earth centimetre by centimetre to rid his country of land mines, a scourge that has become more numerous in the time he's been working. He's seen an anti-personnel mine blow up in front of him and still bears the scars where his body wasn't shielded by protective gear.

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He presses on in spite of the dangers, working in the hot sun on the weekend to help clear the perimeter of a bombed-out weapons factory east of Kandahar, because he considers it "a kind of jihad."

"If you protect the life of one person, then you will be rewarded as if you have protected all the world," Mr. Ahmed said, citing a verse from the Koran. But that dedication hasn't been enough to protect de-miners from attacks. Teams have been targeted in several parts of the country and at least 10 people have been killed since August.

As the world prepares to mark International Mine Action Day this Friday, Afghanistan continues to struggle as one of the most heavily mined countries on Earth. It is impossible to know the number of mines and pieces of unexploded ordnance that litter the ground, but the best estimate is that about 750,000 square kilometres of land remain too dangerous to use.

Because of the targeted attacks, the United Nations in Kandahar province is not escalating operations but instead has reduced its number of teams and now limits its work to areas near the city.

Sayed Ahmad (no relation to the veteran de-miner), the regional officer in charge of the UN Mine Action Center for Afghanistan, said the agency would like to strike a deal with the insurgents for safe passage but are afraid of incurring the wrath of the government in Kabul. "If we have contact, the government will take negative action because they will say we are joined with the Taliban," he said at his office in Kandahar. "And if we work too closely with the government, the Taliban will get negative, So we are stuck in the middle."

That impasse has forced the UN to radically curtail its de-mining work in the province. Last summer, agency personnel had been working as far afield as Panjwai, a volatile district where the Taliban is strong, but they changed tactics after three support staff were kidnapped.

The agency contacted the Taliban to plead for the men's lives, but Sayed Ahmad said they were told that the situation had already been referred "to the court." The men were later found dead, still wearing uniforms with the badge of DAFA, the de-mining agency for Afghanistan.

A man who regularly speaks on behalf of the Taliban said that his group is being unfairly blamed for the kidnapping and killing. "The Taliban was not involved in this case," Qari Yousuf Ahmadi said through a translator. "We don't want to kill the people who collect mines; this is good action."

But the damage has been done. It was a month after that incident before UN teams began working again. And they now consider enormous parts of the province off limits.

A map showing the initial goals of Operation Hamkari (which means co-operation), a project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, showed the area west and south of Kandahar city divided into sectors. No substantial area was then considered safe enough to ignore. De-mining teams have since narrowed their scope and now stay within a five-kilometre radius of Kandahar city.

In the more remote areas, the UN has set up community-based "mine-risk education teams" and is compiling maps of reported dangers, but they can't go to help the people directly.

"In the areas which we are not able to send our teams, we are getting the reports every month of some victims injured and killed," Sayed Ahmad said. Each month, mines and unexploded ordnance kill or injure an average of 62 Afghans. About half of the victims are children. The overwhelming scale of the problem means that, for now, there is enough work close to Kandahar city to keep de-miners busy.

Backhoes break up the rocky soil, in the process detonating some ordnance, but most of the work is done with hand tools and metal detectors. The threat of grievous danger is never far away. As well as donning heavy vests and helmets, visitors are required to sign in and provide their blood type.

"It's my career," Noor Ahmad said with a shrug when asked whether he would prefer an office job. A father of five, he makes about $250 a month. "We are obliged to work and support the family. Besides, we want to support the nation."

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