

Afghan civilians: Victims of NATO negligence



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**NATO Summit in Wales:
Handicap International urges governments
to protect Afghan civilians**

September 2, 2014

Takoma Park, MD—As the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) prepares for a summit in Wales on September 4 and 5, as part of plans to wind down military operations in Afghanistan, Handicap International calls on all International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troop-contributing nations to immediately mark and clear areas contaminated by explosive remnants of war (ERW). The countries should provide non-discriminating and impartial assistance to all the victims of the conflict by financing mine action activities through United Nations pooled funds.

Military bases and firing ranges are now being closed at a rapid rate, but have not been systematically cleared of ERW stored, abandoned or used by military personnel. Furthermore, all the maps of land contaminated by ISAF operations are not yet being made available and people are not sufficiently aware of the risks they face, hampering efforts to prevent further civilian casualties. ERW from ISAF's operations now contaminate hundreds of square miles of land, posing a threat to Afghan lives. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the number of reported civilian casualties of ERW increased dramatically in 2013 and 2014.

NATO will be holding a summit in Newport, Wales, on September 4 and 5, 2014 as it prepares to bring an end to 13 years of military operations in Afghanistan. The summit hopes to secure the successful withdrawal of ISAF by ensuring the effectiveness of the Afghan security forces and their ability to maintain the country's security through a training and support mission beyond December 2014.

Handicap International will use this opportunity to remind governments attending the summit of the need to mark and clear all areas contaminated by their ERW and to finance a wide-reaching victim assistance program as part of the transition process. ERW marking, clearance, removal and destruction as well as victim assistance are compulsory under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons Protocol V, to which most of the ISAF troop-contributing nations are party.

Since 2010, international military bases, including firing ranges, have been closing and their perimeters progressively handed back for civilian use. However, they have not been systematically cleared of ERW. According to a report published by the [Washington Post](#) in April 2014, at least 800 square miles of land has been contaminated by grenades, rockets and mortar shells that could explode at any time, killing or wounding civilians. More than 300 battle sites are also littered with ERW used by ISAF. These risk areas have not been properly mapped. The current lack of data hinders a comprehensive estimation of the clearance costs and the exact surface to be cleared.

“One of the key challenges is to obtain precise data from the international military forces,” says Anna Nijsters, Director of ENNA, the Brussels-based European Network of NGOs in Afghanistan, of which Handicap International is a member. “The governments of ISAF troop-contributing nations, including the major European powers and the United States, have to

allocate an ERW clearance budget and define a clearance strategy, despite a step-up in troop withdrawals.”

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported a 14% increase in civilian casualties caused by ERW during the first six months of 2014, compared to the same period in 2013 (206 civilian casualties in total; 76% of whom were children). This follows a dramatic 63% increase in 2013 compared to 2012 (343 casualties in total, 83% of whom were children)¹.

Rahmatulla Gholam Reza became a landmine victim at the age of nine. Today, he is an active member of the Ban Advocates, a group of landmine and cluster munitions victims organized by Handicap International to ensure that the needs of ERW accident survivors are understood and argued for at the international level, and ultimately met.

Rahmatulla fears for Afghan civilians, especially for the children. “My country was already one of the most contaminated countries in the world, even before ISAF intervened,” he says. “We need to ensure that the NATO-member countries meet their commitments to mark and clear ERW so they do not lead to the loss of more child casualties. I lost both of my legs as a child when I stepped on a landmine and it completely changed my life. I don’t want to see that happening to anybody else.”

Handicap International has worked in Afghanistan for almost two decades, since 1996. The organization has witnessed a rise in the damage caused by ERW, and is outraged by the unbearable situation facing civilians. More than 180 people, including several mine and ERW victims, work for Handicap International in Afghanistan. Their efforts focus on physical rehabilitation, victim assistance, and mine/ERW risk education.

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¹ UNAMA Mid Year Report 2014, Protection of Civilians, pp. 66-67.

<http://www.unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/English%20edited%20light.pdf>

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I. Aftermath of 13 years of military operations

The presence of international military forces in Afghanistan, a country already heavily contaminated by mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW)², has made the situation worse.

International military forces launched their first military operations in Afghanistan in 2001. Troop numbers increased continually to over 130,000 in December 2009. Over the years, International Military Forces used weapons which left ERW (grenades, rockets and mortar shells, etc.) behind. An exit strategy was agreed in 2010, with the last foreign troops engaged in combat expected to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014; and a support mission expected to follow from 2015 to at least 2016.

As a result of this “transition process”, foreign military bases, including firing ranges, have been progressively closed and handed over for public use at an increasingly rapid rate, without being systematically cleared of ERW prior to closure. In addition, military operations by international military forces have created additional danger zones. According to a report published in the *Washington Post* in April 2014³, U.S. military officials admit that maps of newly-contaminated sites do not exist yet, since many were not accurately targeted. ERW therefore continue to litter large areas of Afghanistan and pose an increasing threat to the daily lives of thousands of Afghans civilians.

1. Widespread contamination

According to the same report published by the *Washington Post*, about 800 square miles of land has been contaminated by grenades, rockets and mortar shells used by ISAF forces in and around former military bases.

The article reported, “the U.S. military shuttered more than half of its 880 bases in Afghanistan and withdrew the bulk of its troops before crafting a plan for removal of unexploded ordnance, said one U.S. military official speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was

Timeline

On October 7, 2001, U.S. and British forces launch “Operation Enduring Freedom” and stage massive airstrikes against strategic Taliban installations. On 31 December, an agreement in Kabul leads to the deployment in Afghanistan of the International Security Assistance Force – ISAF.

On July 31, 2006, NATO assumes leadership of ISAF, under U.S. command. The number of personnel on the ground increases constantly between 2006 and December 2009, with regular reinforcements of U.S. troops.

In December 2009, U.S. troop levels are around 100,000.

In 2010, NATO leaders agree on an Afghanistan exit strategy: plans are laid to withdraw most troops by 2014.

On May 27, 2014, Barack Obama announces his intention to “turn the page on more than a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.” By 2015, only 9,800 U.S. military personnel are expected to be present in Afghanistan and a support mission is expected to start. At that time, total of 32,000 U.S. troops are stationed in the country.

On August 4, 2014, the ISAF reported 48 countries contributing 44,299 troops. The mission counts 30,700 American, 3,936 British, and 2,250 German troops.

² The term “explosive remnants of war” refers to various types of unexploded ordnance such as grenades, shells, rockets or cluster munitions still present after the end of an armed conflict. Civilians are the main victims of this type of weapon.

³ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/a-rising-number-of-children-are-dying-from-us-explosives-littering-afghanistan/2014/04/09/dea709ae-b900-11e3-9a05-c739f29ccb08_story.html

not authorized to comment on the matter.” The article also cited U.S. officials who estimated “that each contaminated base contains thousands of undetonated explosives.”

Other still-active military installations have not been properly secured and civilians are able to access them at risk of life and limb.

More than 300 sites of battles against Armed Opposition Groups are also littered with ERW used by International Military Forces. Worse still, these areas at risk have not been mapped yet.

2. Permanent threat to civilian lives

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) [reported](#) a 14% increase in civilian casualties caused by ERW during the first six months of 2014, compared to the same period in 2013 (206 civilian casualties in total; 76% of which were children). This follows a dramatic 63% increase in 2013, compared to 2012 (343 casualties in total, 83% of which were children)⁴. A spokesperson for the United Nations noted that the increase in civilian casualties coincide with “an increase in ground engagements” and “the escalated pace of ISAF base and firing range closure with concerns that high explosive firing ranges had not been sufficiently cleared of unexploded ordnance prior to base closure.”



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The Mine Action Coordination Center of Afghanistan (MACCA) confirmed that “Afghan civilians are being killed and injured because of ERW and UXO left behind on ISAF vacated

⁴ UNAMA Mid Year Report 2014, Protection of Civilians, pp. 66-67.
<http://www.unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/English%20edited%20light.pdf>

sites... These incidents saw a sharp rise in 2013” as more international military forces firing ranges and bases are being closed down and are “not properly cleared before land is being handed back to communities.”

MACCA’s data on civilian casualties resulting from ERW accidents in former international military sites between 2010 and 2014 are the following:

- 114 casualties,
- 75% of them being children (86),
- 88% of the total incidents happened in the past three years, 38 in 2012; 48 in 2013 and already 15 by mid-2014; clearly indicating a growing problem that coincides with the withdrawal of international military forces,
- Those reported incidents have been recorded in at least 19 out of the 34 provinces.
- Not all victims are necessarily recorded in Afghanistan due to difficulty of access to the locations and victims in order to confirm and verify information, thus the actual figure is likely to be even higher⁵.

Accidents often take place during daily activities, such as leading animals to pasture or gathering firewood. Some nomadic families have had to pitch their tents on former ISAF firing ranges. Their lives are permanently at risk. Munitions such as 40mm egg hand grenades, which are thrown manually, may not explode on impact due to technical faults or because they land on sand, which is too soft to trigger a detonation. They can remain active for many years. They look like small round balls and can catch the eye of children who are unaware that they are dangerous.

“It’s going to take time and money to finish the job, but it’s really important for the safety of Afghans, and it’s the right thing to do,” declared Edward Thomas, spokesman for General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Civilians won’t be safe until we’ve secured these areas,” says Major Michael Fuller, who coordinates the teams responsible for surveying and clearing areas contaminated by the U.S. In April 2014, only 3% of potentially dangerous areas were cleared.

3. Handicap International raises alarm: ISAF troop-contributing nations’ responsibility

Although certain U.S. military officials have recently declared their intention to clear contaminated areas, the budget allocated at the moment by troop contributing nations remains insufficient. According to U.S. officials, as reported by the [Washington Post](#) in April 2014, the estimated cost of clearing these weapons is more than \$250 million. Following a spate of accidents close to military bases, some barriers have been erected around military installations, but many remain unprotected and lack marking of the explosive danger. Given the scale of the problem, this response falls far short of what is required.

Worse still, ISAF officials have argued that since Afghanistan is not a State Party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons⁶, the clearance of high explosive firing ranges is not a requirement but a decision left to the discretion of Troop Contributing Nations (TCNs): “TCNs and ISAF are under no legal obligation to conduct ERW clearance” because

⁵ The Washington Post found 14 casualties not included in the U.N. data.

⁶[http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/\(httpAssets\)/A22CFFAEEA7AD447C12572F4002FDB1E/\\$file/CCW+amended+F.pdf](http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/(httpAssets)/A22CFFAEEA7AD447C12572F4002FDB1E/$file/CCW+amended+F.pdf)

Afghanistan has not ratified Protocol V (...) ISAF has no authority to direct TCNs to mark or clear ranges. Marking and clearance is a national issue.”⁷

However, as far as explosive remnants of war are concerned, the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons Protocol V is very clear: “parties to an armed conflict shall, after the cessation of active hostilities, provide technical, financial, material or human resources assistance to facilitate the marking and clearance, removal or destruction of explosive remnants of war.” The Convention also stipulates that parties to an armed conflict that have used or abandoned explosive ordnance shall “make available such information to the party or parties in control of the affected area, and to other relevant organizations.” As States Party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons Protocol V, most of the troop contribution nations are therefore required to clear contaminated areas as swiftly as possible, or to supply the information necessary to do so, whether Afghanistan is a State Party or not.

Working alongside the Afghan population for almost 20 years (1996), Handicap International has witnessed the growing destruction caused by the ongoing conflict and in particular by landmines and ERW. The organization provides assistance to victims through its rehabilitation activities; helps to prevent new accidents by teaching Afghans to spot, avoid and report mines and ERW (known as ‘risk education sessions’), and provides socio-economic support to people with disabilities, including victims of mines and ERW.

Handicap International will draw attention to this worrying situation at the 2014 NATO Summit in Newport, Wales. The organization calls on the governments⁸ of ISAF troop-contributing nations to meet their responsibilities under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons by marking and clearing all hazardous areas, and by supplying a non-discriminating and impartial assistance to victims of mines and explosive remnants of war.

⁷http://www.unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/Feb_8_2014_PoC-report_2013-Full-report-ENG.pdf

⁸ 48 nations contribute to ISAF, but Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Malaysia and Tonga are not States parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and the United Kingdom, Greece, Jordan, Mongolia, Montenegro, Turkey are not State parties to the Protocol V which deals with ERW. More information about the ISAF troop-contributing nations: <http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php>

II. Handicap International's operations in Afghanistan

Handicap International has been working with Afghan refugees in Pakistan since the mid-1980s, and started to work inside Afghanistan in 1996.

More than 180 people, including several mine and ERW victims, work for Handicap International in Afghanistan. The organization's mine action efforts currently focus on physical rehabilitation, victim assistance and mine/ERW risk education. The organization also works on socio-economic inclusion of people with disabilities.

Mines and ERW risk education



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The aim of this project is to reduce the number of victims of mines and explosive remnants of war by raising the awareness of vulnerable groups, and especially local people living in dangerous or potentially dangerous areas, as well as drivers of transport companies travelling through at-risk areas, who are the main victims of mines. In partnership with the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan, Handicap International meets with communities in the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar and uses flashcards, videos and practical exercises to explain the practical steps to take when confronted with an unidentified object.

Rehabilitation

Since 1996, Handicap International has managed a rehabilitation center in a regional hospital in Kandahar, in the south of the country. The center runs physical therapy sessions for patients (people with disabilities and injured people requiring rehabilitation) and produces prostheses, orthoses and mobility aids for people with disabilities in its workshop.

Male and female staff members treat patients from the country's four southern provinces (Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Uruzgan), allowing women to benefit from care and orthopedic-fitting. An accommodation center enables people from remote rural districts and those accompanying them to stay at the center if their care requires them to do so. The medical teams also train colleagues from the hospital and the region's rural clinics to strengthen their understanding of disability and the system for referring patients to appropriate health facilities.



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In western Afghanistan, Handicap International's initial project, running since 2003, aims to improve and develop rehabilitation services mainly by supplying technical and material aid to regional health structures.

A network of five clinics and primary health centers will be provided with qualified staff (physical therapists) to run physical therapy sessions. The organization also performs day-to-day activities to support rehabilitation teams working in two other clinics in rural areas and to identify and refer people with disabilities who find it difficult to access care across the province.

Handicap International provides technical and financial support to local hospitals (regional and district hospitals) by funding certain physical therapy posts and training their medical staff (nurses, midwives and doctors) in disability issues and related medical care.

Handicap International works also to implement a referral system between communities and appropriate services. Focused on rural communities, the project identifies mine/ERW victims and other people with disabilities and helps them to access rehabilitation care and orthopedic-fitting and physical therapy services.

A network of volunteers from communities exposed to ERW in Helmand and Kandahar provinces refers people to care facilities, provides guidance to mine/ERW victims and people with disabilities, and offers them follow-up care in partnership with rehabilitation centers. Handicap International has also supplied the rehabilitation center in Kandahar with additional equipment. The organization is also helping to improve rehabilitation services by providing occupational training and developing new techniques, such as upper limb prostheses.

To bolster victim assistance, Handicap International works to ensure that all action plans resulting from the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and the Mine Ban Treaty are linked with each other, thus informing a better comprehension and coherent implementation of victim assistance in the country. Handicap International works at national level, but also at the international level, particularly with the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC) and European Network of NGOs in Afghanistan (ENNA), based in Brussels.

ENNA is a network of more than 30 NGOs from across Europe, including Handicap International. The groups are actively involved in non-profit humanitarian and development assistance to Afghanistan. ENNA's overall goal is to ensure that European and international policies and decisions help Afghans build a safe and just society.

III. Testimonies

In Afghanistan, an alarming number of children are killed and maimed by mines and explosive remnants of war. According to the United Nations, 83% of recorded civilian victims of ERW in 2013 were children.



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Hayatullah, 12, a prosthesis and a smile

Hayatullah lives in Khenjak, a village in Kandahar province. In 2011, he set off for a walk to see his aunt. Before he could reach her house, he stepped on a mine, triggering an explosion that seriously injured his right leg. His family brought him to Pakistan, where he was received basic care, and where doctors amputated his leg.

Back in Afghanistan a neighbor (himself fitted with an orthopedic device), suggested that Hayatullah visit the rehabilitation center in Kandahar managed by Handicap International. The center's team supported Hayatullah. After measuring and taking a cast of his stump, the technicians made him his first prosthesis.

Hayatullah's first steps with his "new leg" were hesitant, but he gradually gained in confidence, and now a smile has returned to his face. Today, Hayatullah is back at school. He's feeling confident about the future and knows he can count on Handicap International's team to adapt or replace his prosthesis as he grows.

Abdul Qawi, 21, dignity restored

Abdul Qawi and his family of ten live in one of Afghanistan's most dangerous and violent neighborhoods in the district of Sangin (Helmand Province).

In October 2013, while collecting firewood behind his house, a bomb exploded and seriously wounded him. He was rushed to the nearest hospital, and the doctors had to amputate his left leg above the knee.

Before the accident, Abdul Qawi was a car dealer. His earnings allowed his family to live. After his amputation, he found himself unable to work. The loss of his leg has affected him both physically and mentally. Doing simple tasks became insurmountable.

In December 2013, Abdul went to the physical rehabilitation center set up by Handicap International. A team of professionals supported him and fitted him with a prosthesis.

Today he is able to walk independently again and can help his family. It is an honor for him.



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Appendix I: Mines and ERW in Afghanistan

Ottawa Mine Ban Convention	State Party (ratified 11/09/2002)
Oslo Convention on Cluster Munitions	State Party (ratified 08/09/2011)
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)	State Party (ratified 18/09/2012)

Although Afghanistan has never produced or exported anti-personnel mines, it is one of the most heavily contaminated countries in the world; it also records the highest number of mine/ERW victims every year. Most of the anti-personnel mines found in Afghanistan were produced in Pakistan, Iran or the former Soviet Union. Throughout the ongoing conflict that started in 1978; landmines, cluster munitions and other explosive weapons have been constantly used and now litter the country. Furthermore ERWs have been abandoned after each military engagement, also participating in the contamination of Afghanistan.

- At least 550 sq.km of land has been contaminated, although the area could be as large as 4,000sq.km, according to the [Landmine Monitor 2013](#). It is difficult to establish a precise figure due to a lack of funding for surveys to determine the actual extent of the contamination.
- According to the Landmine Monitor 2013, at least 750,000 people live under the daily threat of these weapons.
- The Mine Action Coordination Centre in Afghanistan estimates that some 22,000 people were killed or injured by mines and explosive remnants of war between 1979 and 2012.
- In 2013, some 83% of recorded casualties of explosive remnants of war were children (United Nations).

Appendix II: Background information on Afghanistan

1. Key data



- **Capital:** Kabul
- **Surface area:** 652,230 sq.km (World Bank 2013)
- **Population:** 30.5 million (World Bank 2013)
- **Official languages:** Dari, Pashto
- **Life expectancy:** 60.9 (UNDP 2013)
- **Human Development Index:** 169/187 (UNDP 2013)
- **GDP per capita:** \$1,892 (UNDP 2010)

2. Recent history of Afghanistan

- **1919:** The Kingdom of Afghanistan gains independence from the United Kingdom on August 19;
- **1973:** King Zaher Shah is deposed in a military coup d'Etat by his cousin, Mohammad Daoud, who seizes power and becomes the first President of the Republic of Afghanistan;
- **1978:** a pro-Soviet government comes to power following a military coup d'Etat;
- **1979-1989:** Soviet troops (around 100,000 men) invade and occupy most the country and anti-communists fighters, known as the Mujahedin fight against them for the independence of the country;
- **1989:** Soviet troops withdraw from Afghanistan. The government of Dr. Najubullah Ahmad Zai and Mujahideen continue to fight for power;
- **1992:** fall of the communist regime. Beginning of the civil war among Mujahideen factions divided along ethnic, religious and regional lines;
- **1994:** a group of former disillusioned Mujahedin from the Pashtun regions decides to split and aims at eliminating the war-lords and imposing their strict view of Islam on the country. They create a new movement: the Taliban, "students of religion";
- **1995:** the Taliban take progressively control of the south of the country, after having peacefully taken the city of Kandahar which will become their stronghold;
- **1996:** the Taliban take Kabul and impose a strict version of sharia (Koranic) law. Former Mujahedin groups form an alliance called the Northern Alliance, based in Pansheer under the leadership Ahmad Shah Massoud;
- **1998:** the Taliban take control of the remaining sector of Bamyán province (center). They control 80% of Afghan territory;
- **2001:** U.S. and British forces launch "Operation Enduring Freedom" and stage massive airstrikes against Taliban and Al Qaeda targets. Quickly joined by allied nations and the Afghan Northern Alliance in their struggle, the United Nations authorizes in December the ISAF to provide security support to the Afghans. By the end of the year, the capital city, Kabul, is under control of international military forces. Accordingly to the Bonn Conference hosted by the United Nations in Germany, a political transition is declared, starting with a provisional government structure, which led to the naming of Hamid Karzai as chairman of the Afghan Interim Authority (AIA) on December 22, 2001;



- **2002:** The AIA holds a nationwide Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) in June 2002, and Hamid Karzai is elected president of the Islamic Transitional State of Afghanistan;
- **2003:** NATO assumes responsibility for the ISAF mission.
- **2004:** the Transitional Authority holds a second nationwide Loya Jirga in Kabul to debate a draft Constitution, which is ultimately adopted in January 2004. The first ever direct presidential election took place on October 9th and saw Hamid Karzai elected;
- **2005:** Parliamentary and Provincial elections are held in September.