OUT OF SIGHT

Landmines and the Crisis in Northeast Nigeria

September 2018
ABOUT MAG

The Mines Advisory Group (MAG) is a global humanitarian and advocacy organisation that finds, removes and destroys landmines, cluster munitions and unexploded bombs from places affected by conflict. Since 1989, MAG has helped over 18 million people in 40 countries rebuild their lives and livelihoods after war.

Issue briefs are part of MAG's policy and advocacy work. Reflecting the experience and realities faced by the organisation's global programmes, they aim to inform and influence policy and good practice on specific issues for the benefit of communities affected by violence, conflict and insecurity.

MAG has been conducting humanitarian response operations in northeast Nigeria since April 2017.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Northeast Nigeria is facing a landmine crisis as a result of the conflict involving Boko Haram. This is exacerbating a protracted conflict and humanitarian emergency in the region. An estimated 7.7 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states. Over half of them are children.

MAG research showed 439 casualties from 144 accidents involving landmines and unexploded bombs between January 2016 and March 2018. Casualty figures reached 19 people per month in 2017, with thirty per cent of civilians killed known to be children. Averaging one person killed or injured in the region every 1.5 days, Nigeria now has one of the ten highest casualty rates in the world.

Nigeria is the first state in Africa to encounter new use of locally-manufactured landmines on this scale. It comes after the international community faced a new landmine emergency in the Middle East in areas retaken from Daesh. This brief outlines the problem and the response so far. This includes life-saving risk education delivered by MAG and other humanitarian organisations to over 680,000.

Photo Right: MAG community liaison teams often work in extreme conditions to support vulnerable communities across northeast Nigeria. Team leader Naomi enthusiastically engages with children in Gambaru, passing on vital life-saving lessons that involve games and drama to make the safety messages resonate.

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Written and edited by: Avishek Banskota, Chris Loughran, Sebastian Kasack and Nina Seecharan
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Registered Office: MAG, Suite 3A, South Central, 11 Peter Street, Manchester M2 5QR
Contact: policy.advocacy@maginternational.org
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NEW LANDMINE USE & CASUALTIES

The Humanitarian Context

Now in its ninth year, the conflict in northeast Nigeria has developed into a major regional crisis. With fighting having spread into neighbouring areas of Cameroon, Chad and Niger, the Lake Chad basin has seen some of the world’s most intense conflict and large-scale displacement. More than 30,000 people have been killed as a result, and over 14.9 million affected across the region.

The humanitarian impact of the protracted conflict has been felt most severely in Nigeria’s northeast states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (see Box 2.2). An estimated 7.7 million people in these three states remain in need of humanitarian assistance, including 4.3 million children.² As of June 2018, more than 823,000 people are still believed to be beyond the reach of humanitarian assistance due to ongoing fighting and insecurity.

New Contamination

Explosive ordnance now poses an additional challenge to civilians as well as the humanitarian community in this already complex emergency. There is evidence of significant new use of landmines deployed by Boko Haram and its splinter groups. These locally-manufactured landmines have been deployed on roads, in fields and also in villages (see Box 2.1).

In addition, MAG and other organisations have encountered unexploded rocket-propelled grenades, projectiles, mortars and grenades. Along with unexploded air-dropped weapons, these also pose a direct risk to humanitarian organisations.

Casualty Rates

With indications of increasing numbers of incidents from landmines and unexploded bombs, MAG’s teams in northeast Nigeria carried out research in March 2018 to gain a clearer picture of the new contamination and its impact.

Key Statistics

- An estimated 7.7 million people in Nigeria’s northeast states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe remain in need of humanitarian assistance.
- 144 reported accidents from landmines and unexploded bombs resulted in at least 439 people being killed or physically injured in just 27 months. 162 people (37 per cent) died as a result of their injuries. In 2016, the casualty rate in Nigeria was the equivalent of 12 people being killed or injured every month by landmines and unexploded bombs, rising to almost 19 per month in 2017 and early 2018. This gives Nigeria one of the ten highest casualty rates in the world.³
- Most of the accidents took place on roads and involved anti-personnel landmines. Of the 439 casualties, 144 were civilians. Many of the casualties and fatalities were among security or military personnel accompanying civilian convoys between towns in Local Government Areas (LGAs), as well as in towns and villages.
- Of the 144 civilians who were killed or injured, 30 per cent were aged 17 or younger. However, limited and incomplete reporting mechanisms mean that the age of just over half of the civilian casualties is not known. It is almost certain that the real number of children and teenagers killed or injured by landmines and unexploded bombs is higher.
- Meanwhile, large parts of Borno State remain inaccessible or only partially accessible to humanitarian workers due to ongoing conflict, with over 820,000 civilians remaining outside of the reach of humanitarian assistance as a result. Some areas remain under the control of Boko Haram and its splinter groups.

Given the intensity of conflict and the confirmed use of anti-personnel landmines, inadequate or absent medical facilities and the lack of reporting systems, we can be certain that casualties from landmines and unexploded bombs are going unreported, probably in significant numbers.

Research covering January 2016 to March 2018 showed reports of 144 separate accidents, far higher than previously estimated. Ninety per cent (130) of the accidents involved landmines and the remaining 10 per cent involved unexploded bombs. Most of them took place in Borno State, but there were also casualties in Yobe and Adamawa.²

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Child Casualties and Known Unknowns

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Casualties and Known

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Current Research

An anti-personnel mine is an explosive munition that detonates due to the presence, proximity or contact of a person. Mines are indiscriminate – or ‘dumb’ – weapons. They cannot distinguish between legitimate military targets and civilians. They keep functioning long after conflict has ended.

Landmines are banned by The Ottawa Treaty, which was negotiated and signed by 122 States in 1997. Since then, another 42 countries have joined the treaty, bringing the total number of States Parties to 164 and making it one of the world’s most successful treaties. As a result, over 49 million stockpiled anti-personnel mines have been destroyed, state production has all but ceased and landmines have become one of the most stigmatised weapons in the world.⁴

In 2016, MAG reported a new emergency from locally produced anti-personnel landmines in parts of Iraq and Syria formerly held by Daesh. Reports also now confirm use of anti-personnel mines in Nigeria.

So far, new contamination of this type affects only a handful of countries.

The World’s New Landmine Emergency

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KEY STATISTICS

- Almost 75 per cent of Borno State is inaccessible or only partially accessible for humanitarian aid organisations.⁵
- Every 10 minutes, one woman dies due to pregnancy or childbirth in Nigeria. At 1,549 per 100,000 live births, the northeast of the country has the highest maternal mortality rate.⁶
- An estimated one million children in Nigeria – one in every five – die before the age of five.
- More than a quarter of under-five deaths occur within the first 28 days (neonatal period).⁷

1. Approximately 14.9 million people
2. Research covering January 2016 to March 2018
3. Research covering January 2016 to March 2018
4. Research covering January 2016 to March 2018
5. Research covering January 2016 to March 2018
6. Research covering January 2016 to March 2018
7. Research covering January 2016 to March 2018

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Box 2.1

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Box 2.2

Key Statistics

- An estimated 7.7 million people in Nigeria’s northeast states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe remain in need of humanitarian assistance.
- 144 reported accidents from landmines and unexploded bombs resulted in at least 439 people being killed or physically injured in just 27 months. 162 people (37 per cent) died as a result of their injuries.
- Deaths and injuries from landmines and unexploded bombs averaged 19 people per month in 2017, one of the top ten casualty rates in the world. Given ongoing conflict and an absence of systematic reporting mechanisms, the true rate will be much higher.
- Of the 144 civilians who were killed or injured by explosive ordnance, 30 per cent were aged 17 or younger.
Saleh Ibrahim, deputy headman of ‘International camp’ in Ngala, which shelters more than 100,000 people.

“People are dying near here. Recently six were killed three kilometres to the south, eight were killed one and a half kilometres to the west, fifteen were killed three kilometres to the north and three were killed one and a half kilometres to the east. All around there is killing going on. This is just in the last couple of months. Looking for firewood is very risky.

“Just last November five girls between eight and seventeen years old found a metal ring on the ground. Two were my sister’s daughters. They thought it might be jewellery. They picked it up. But it was linked to a landmine and they all died.”
Photo Above: A camp for displaced people in Ngaia called ‘International camp’ as it is located at the site that was previously Ngaia International School. New arrivals come all the time and the camp now has more than 100,000 inhabitants. Most live in makeshift shelters, some live in the shells of partly destroyed school buildings. Attacks by non-state armed groups are frequent. There are also landmines in the vicinity. Six girls were killed close to this camp in November 2017 when they triggered a landmine.

Photo Left: Haja Maira: “I have been here for nearly three years. I recognise some of the items on MAG’s risk education posters. I saw many on the ground when I fled from the fighting near the border with Niger in the north.”

Photo Right: Children walk past a destroyed school in Ngaia.
THE MINE ACTION RESPONSE

The mine action community has been active in northeast Nigeria since the end of 2015, led by NGOs and with support from UNICEF and OCHA. MAG joined the Danish Demining Group in northeast Nigeria early 2017 to implement risk education projects. One of the five ‘pillars’ of mine action, risk education aims to prevent casualties from explosive ordnance by working with communities to develop safer action and behaviour.

We already have information showing that communities in garrison towns are exposed to the risk of accidents when collecting water and firewood and carrying out other essential activities. Work to date will have helped save thousands of lives and limbs, but it will not on its own provide a durable solution to the new contamination from landmines, unexploded ordnance and abandoned IEDs. Instead, it should act as a platform for a comprehensive mine action response, building on existing strengths and capacity.

Risk Education & Survey

To date, risk education programmes conducted by international NGOs and partners have reached over 680,000 women, girls, boys and men, broadly in equal number. The majority of recipients of risk education are from communities displaced or affected by the conflict. Activities aim to support them on their return to areas of known or likely contamination.

Risk education takes place through direct engagement with communities, as well as radio broadcasts and sessions in schools. The majority of the vulnerable populations live in LGAs that are mostly only accessible to humanitarians by UN helicopter services.

MAG has also supported over 800 staff from over 20 humanitarian NGOs to manage the risk from landmines and unexploded bombs. In addition, safety briefings have also been provided to government officials providing services to conflict-affected communities.

Mine Action Planning and Integrated Humanitarian Response

As well as preventing casualties, community engagement also plays a critical role in gathering information about the location, nature and extent of contamination and its likely impact. While contamination from landmines and other explosive ordnance has been confirmed, ongoing conflict and difficulty in accessing many areas means that the true extent of new contamination is not yet fully known.

Continued engagement with communities and other humanitarian organisations will remain critical to designing the broader mine action response. There have been some positive developments in strategic planning with mine action referenced in a number of humanitarian strategies, including the 2017 and 2018 Humanitarian Response Plans. The importance of demining was also referenced in the ‘Buhari Plan’, released in 2016 by the Federal Government of Nigeria’s Presidential Committee on the Northeast.

But overall, the confirmation of scale of casualties and indications of contamination will undoubtedly be higher than MAG’s research shows. It must be given higher priority within humanitarian response planning. Survey and clearance of explosive ordnance must be considered a protection priority and more closely integrated into planning for any return. With contamination likely to be extensive and presenting a risk to multiple returning communities, mine action’s response should be considered critical to supporting returns and early recovery.

Casualty Surveillance & Assistance to Survivors

The sharp rise in casualties since 2016 creates a requirement to support survivors of accidents as well as their families, whose needs endure for life. To date, capacity to support survivors has so far been limited to trauma response and basic psychosocial support by the government health sector, supported by the ICRC and a number of international NGOs.

The mine action response must be integrated and comprehensive, including the sustainable provision of rehabilitation and support to survivors and their families. MAG’s research has highlighted the absence of a structured injury and casualty surveillance system in northeast Nigeria. A comprehensive system needs to be established as soon as possible in order to support effective assistance for survivors, but also to fully capture the extent and nature of contamination.

Approximately 40% of the 1.6 million displaced persons in Borno State are in camp or camp-like settings, with an additional 60% living with host communities.
Developing Mine Action in Nigeria

There can be little doubt of the significant need for survey and clearance of landmines and other explosive ordnance. Initial survey activities are already being undertaken by MAG and other humanitarian organisations and these should be encouraged. Planning for clearance can also start now, but expectations must be realistic. Any promises of ‘quick fixes’ will not be met by reality. We have learned from many other emergencies that it can take time to train teams to the necessary level.

The right expertise nevertheless exists, particularly among international NGOs, and the time needed to train and equip people can be measured in weeks and months. Almost thirty years of mine action response have shown that recruiting and training staff from communities enhances the effectiveness of programmes. It is also the right thing to do as it supports communities to lead their own recovery from conflict.

Drawing on recent lessons from the Middle East, it is also of critical importance to reaffirm that mine action is an inherently humanitarian activity and should only take place in areas where active hostilities have ceased. Disposal of explosive ordnance also takes place beyond humanitarian activity and the scope of mine action, including for security, political or force protection ends. It is vital that mine action is not merged or confused with these activities. There must be a clear and visible separation of actors and activities, including within the United Nations system.

The response should draw on three decades of lessons learned in emergency mine action response programming, including the national and international community response to new landmine use in parts of the Middle East. It must have a foundation in national ownership and be tailored to the specific conflict and humanitarian context in Nigeria.

The following recommendations aim to assist and inform decision makers in their approach to the further development of mine action programming in northeast Nigeria.

1. **Mine action should be prioritised as a core protection activity within the humanitarian response in Nigeria’s northeast.** Mine action should continue to be highlighted in Humanitarian Response Plans as well as being prioritised in donor strategies.

2. **Mine action NGOs should develop more structured programming and advocacy partnerships with the wider humanitarian community.** This should focus especially on coordinated strategies for safe, voluntary, dignified and informed returns to areas where there is a risk posed by landmines and other explosive ordnance.

3. **Mine action must remain solely a humanitarian activity, undertaken only for humanitarian objectives in areas where active hostilities have ceased.** There must be a clear and visible separation between mine action and other explosive ordnance disposal undertaken in support of military, security and force protection activity.

4. **Risk education should continue to be prioritised as a protection issue and supported by the international donor community.** It should continue to be designed and implemented in a way that is sensitive to age and gender and also linked to planning for the return of displaced communities.

5. **Progress in non-technical survey to identify the nature, extent and location of contamination should continue, along with increased planning for clearance activities.** Strategies should be incremental, linked to humanitarian access and include and empower women and men from conflict-affected communities.

6. **Incidents and accidents involving anti-personnel landmines, including those of improvised nature, should be reported as such.** IED terminology should be avoided when referring to any work with munitions meeting the definition of landmines and there should be clear separation from reporting around IED ‘attacks’. Failure to do this will compromise humanitarian activity and undermine the full implementation of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, including effective clearance and support to victims and survivors.
In addition, MAG continues to support the recommendations made by the 2017 Clearing the Mines Report. This highlighted Nigeria’s renewed obligations under Article 5 of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention to address new contamination, both confirmed or suspected, as well as to formally report to the Convention under its Article 7 transparency provisions.

Mine action organisations, including those working in Nigeria, are in a strong position to provide expert support in the development of reports and plans. However, with a significant proportion of Borno State inaccessible or only partially accessible, States Parties to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention as well as other stakeholders should expect the development of a clear contamination picture to be incremental and also dependent on conflict dynamics and humanitarian access.

International assistance for mine action in Nigeria should support and build on existing in-country capacity, particularly national and international NGOs. Donors should allocate funds for mine action NGOs operating in Nigeria.

Nigeria should re-establish and resource a national mine action centre with a foundation in the principle of national ownership. Its mandate should cover national coordination of survey and clearance of landmines and explosive ordnance, risk education, assistance to survivors and victims, advocacy and ensuring the transparent destruction of any stockpiles of anti-personnel landmines.

Endnotes
1. https://www.acaps.org/country/Nigeria
2. This reporting excludes casualties arising from conflict itself or ‘attacks’, including from improvised explosive devices (IEDs) such as so-called suicide bombers, command-operated devices or vehicle-borne IEDs. These lie beyond the scope of this report and mine action response.
3. This is based on casualty reporting by the Landmine Monitor, which is disaggregated by country: http://www.themonitor.org
4. The Ottawa Treaty, named after the city where it was signed, is officially known as the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction.
5. https://www.acaps.org/country/nigeria/crisis-analysis
7. https://www.mineactionreview.org/country/nigeria

Girls at school in Gambaru. The school was attacked by a non-state armed group in February 2018. More than 100 girls were abducted from another school that same month.