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Coalition admits its left unexploded munitions behind as it closed Afghan bases

By Jay Price

July 31, 2013

The U.S.-led military coalition in Afghanistan has agreed to do a better job of cleaning up deadly unexploded munitions from its bases and firing ranges as it closes them down after the U.N. accused them of leaving dangerous explosives behind, a coalition spokesman wrote Wednesday in an emailed statement.

The International Security Assistance Force also will re-examine bases that already have been demolished to make certain unexploded ordnance hasn't been left behind, the spokesman said.

So-called "explosive remnants of war" have emerged in the past few months as an increasing danger to civilians, in particular children. In the first half of the year, nearly 150 people were killed or injured when such munitions detonated, according to a report issued Wednesday by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, or UNAMA. That's a jump of 53 percent from the same period in 2012. Nearly 80 percent of the victims were children.

United Nations demining officials told McClatchy in July that they believed the increase was mainly related to the closing of the hundreds of small ISAF bases as the coalition prepares to end its combat mission by the end of next year.

Locals flock to such bases after they're demolished, looking for anything they can use or sell.

In the report, the U.N. mission makes several recommendations for ISAF, including that it conduct a comprehensive review of every base and firing range closed or handed over to Afghan security forces, including informal ranges.

Lt. Col. William Griffin, an ISAF spokesman, wrote in an emailed statement that ISAF was taking the issue seriously and had the same goals regarding the protection of civilians as the U.N. mission.

“We acknowledge the recommendations that UNAMA makes and will work to incorporate those recommendations into our plans and procedures,” Griffin wrote. “Both UNAMA and ISAF are mandated by the U.N. Security Council and maintain the same goal: to mitigate and end civilian casualties as thoroughly as possible.”

U.N. officials said last month that ISAF commanders had been evasive about how well the bases and ranges had been cleared of dangerous material, and that they believed little had been done.

In two cases this year that were so dire that U.N. officials treated them as emergencies, the mission funded cleanup operations on firing ranges at closed bases, including one where an accident hurt eight civilians. The emergency cleanups turned up hundreds of pieces of ordnance including grenades and mortar shells.

Griffin wrote that ISAF would thoroughly review its cleanup efforts at firing ranges.

“We have identified potential gaps in procedures, reporting and tracking of firing ranges on current or former ISAF bases and leaders have been directed to increase their oversight in regard to this matter,” he wrote.

ISAF also was taking steps to work with the U.N. mission and other agencies to develop a coordinated and consolidated system for tracking firing ranges, he wrote.

That’s not as simple as it might sound. In late 2011 there were about 800 coalition facilities across Afghanistan, according to ISAF figures.

More than 600 of them, mostly small bases used by a few dozen troops or less, already had been shut down or handed over to the Afghan government by the beginning of 2013, when the focus began shifting to closure of larger bases.

Some of those that were shut down had well-defined formal firing ranges with built-up berms; others had informal areas used for practice and sighting in weapons that might be hard to pinpoint now.

Troops on bases, large and small, use firing ranges to brush up their skills and test weapons.