https://news.vice.com/articles/departing-troops-are-leaving-behind-an-explosive-mess-in-afghanistan?trk_source=homepage-in-the-news

Troops Are Leaving Behind an Explosive Mess in Afghanistan

By Alice Speri

April 19, 2014 | 12:50 pm

Raised between one conflict and the next, Firoz Alizada was, like many Afghans, used to living with war and its leftovers.

When he was a child in Parwan province, Alizada and his friends would pick up UXOs and ERWs — the technical words for unexploded ordnances and explosive remnants of war — and play with them like they were marbles. They would collect bullets, throw them in a fire, and watch them explode.

“They would go bum bum bum, and we would be happy,” Alizada said, adding that he also collected up to 20 bombs and other abandoned explosives. “I just wanted to play with them. I was never told by someone that I should not touch them. My family was raised with war and it was normal for kids to be out in contaminated places.”

Then, when he was 13, Alizada stepped on a mine he had not seen. It took him four days to get to a hospital in Kabul, by which time both his legs were gone.

“I was lucky to survive,” Alizada, who is now an adult and a manager for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, based in Geneva, told VICE News. “I lost a lot of blood, there was no ambulance so I was carried in a truck. I was treated by a surgeon that was not really a surgeon. But I feel really lucky.”

Afghan children learn about ERWs and UXOs.

Pretty much every faction fighting there in the last decades did its part to fill Afghanistan with mines: the Soviets, the Najibullah government’s troops, the mujaheeden, and more recently the Northern Alliance and the Taliban.

In 2002, following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, UNMAS — the UN agency in charge of mine clearance worldwide — set out on the massive task to free the country of all mines by 2023, a deadline UN officials say they are confident they will meet.

To date, working with its Afghan counterpart and dozens of NGOs, the agency has cleared some 22,000 minefields and destroyed 1.2 million mines — more than 78 percent of the estimated total — reducing the number of related casualties to about 31 a month, about half of what it was just a few years ago.

All good then, or at least heading that way? Not so fast.

'An assistance force doesn’t leave ERWs behind that kill Afghan civilians.'

Last year, as most foreign troops in the country began preparations to finally leave, UN officials and others keeping track of the victims of abandoned explosives noticed a new trend: more and more people, and especially children, were being killed, not by landmines left over by the Soviets or the Taliban but by undetonated explosives, like grenades and mortar shells, left behind by departing foreign troops with NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

“The increase in accidents coincided with ISAF withdrawal,” Abigail Hartley, program manager at UNMAS in Afghanistan, told VICE News.

The problem has spiked as troops have closed down and abandoned dozens of firing ranges, most of which are still littered with thousands of unexploded devices.

“They have an obligation as this international assistance force to Afghanistan,” Hartley added. “An assistance force doesn’t leave ERWs behind that kill Afghan civilians. What kind of assistance is that?”

VICE News reached out to ISAF but did not immediately get a comment, although a spokesman for the force said he would send some statistics "as soon as we have the information."

US officials with the force told the *Washington Post* that they plan to clean up the ranges they are responsible for — some 800 square miles-worth. Other governments with the force have largely remained silent on the issue, and there is no indication the ranges will be cleared before most troops pack and go home by the end of the year.

Foreign militaries that close down bases usually clean up after themselves, and it’s not clear why hundreds of firing ranges — which troops used for training during the decade-long war — slipped through the cracks.

As the casualties escalated, some have said they will clear any firing range they leave from now on — hardly enough of a commitment, critics said.

In some cases, cleanup crews came too late, and found that the firing ranges had already been picked clean by scrap metal collectors — a hugely dangerous business many poor Afghans have come to rely on.

Hopes and fear as Afghan women head to the polls. Read more here.

“I haven’t gotten a good answer about why the haven’t done it, why they haven’t paid attention since the beginning. Probably they never thought of it as a priority, they haven't considered it as serious as it has become,” Alizada said, about the failure to clear the abandoned explosives. “But it’s about saving lives: they have to do it a lot more, and they have to do it now.”

'Maybe 3 out of 10 will explode, and people think they’ll be lucky.'

Some nations found legal excuses to get out of the costly cleanup.

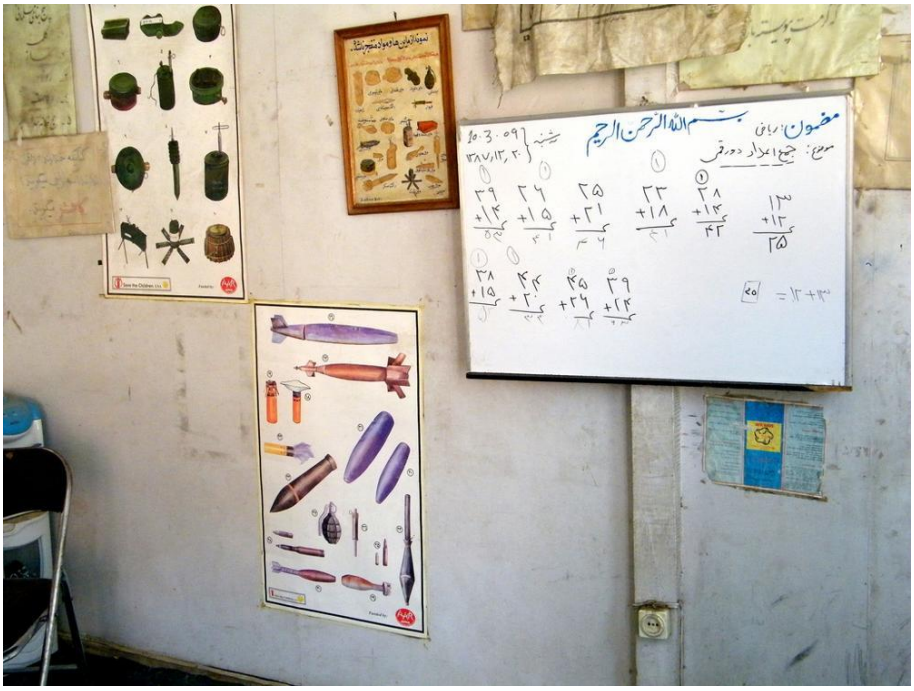
As Afghanistan never signed the UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons — which focuses on weapons that are “indiscriminate” or “excessively injurious” — it’s technically *legal* for them to leave a mess behind.

Never mind that they themselves are signatory to the treaty, and never mind ethics.

“It’s a moral obligation, regardless of all these treaties and binding conventions,” Alizada said. “How can they accept this? They have to take it seriously.”

Unlike landmines, which are hidden underground, ERWs are usually more visible, but that hardly solves the problem as poor Afghans, especially children, scout them out to take them apart and sell the scrap metal for a few dollars.

While landmines are generally designed to maim, not kill, most other undetonated explosives are much deadlier.



Some schools teach Afghan children math and ERW awareness

If Alizada’s generation liked to play with abandoned explosives, today’s young Afghans take the risk out of poverty.

Many in the country have been exposed to years of mine awareness campaigns, but a combination of economic desperation and habit keep them coming back.

'Contamination is everywhere.'

“It becomes quite a normal thing to go and touch them,” Alizada said, noting that the explosives don’t *always* go off. “Maybe 3 out of 10 will explode, and people think they’ll be lucky.”

“In some cases they take risks, because of the poverty,” Sediq Rashid, Director of the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), a UN project in Afghanistan, told VICE

News. “They go, take the risk, take out the explosives, and then try to sell them to scrap metal dealers.”

Most of the casualties are children, he added, “because it’s very hard to change their behavior.”

But that’s not the only problem. Another one is that nobody really seems to know where these firing ranges are. Some ISAF nations have shared coordinates for the fields, but those might just show an entry gate, or a corner, but don’t indicate how widely the fields extend and whether they were ever cleared.

"I find it really amazing that actually ISAF don't seem to know where all of their firing ranges were," said Hartley, adding that getting data as been a huge challenge. To their credit, she added, they seem to be trying.

Most firing ranges are left unfenced and unmarked, but even if they aren’t, “as soon as the military forces abandon the area, the local population manages to go through them,” Rashid said.

That, he added, doesn’t even touch what is the biggest problem: not just the firing ranges, but the hundreds of battlefields where conflict took place — often next to the homes, villages, and fields of the local population — which are nearly impossible to track but are filled with undetonated, and unstable, explosives.

“Contamination is everywhere,” Rashid said. “Wherever the conflict has taken place there’s the possibility of explosive remnants of war. It’s everywhere.”

As if that weren’t bad enough — agencies and NGOs working on the cleanup are now also being hit hard by the ongoing withdrawal, not of troops but of funds.

“I think a lot of nations are looking for an excuse to leave Afghanistan, because they have been here a long time,” Hartley said, adding that the ERWs issue is only adding to the ongoing clearance of mines. “What I don’t want is contamination leftover from ISAF that somehow I will have to find the money to clear.”

She estimated the cleanup would cost some $500 million — while US officials said cleaning up *their* leftovers would add up to $250, which Congress is yet to approve.

'Even if they leave Afghanistan, they should consider these people.'

“Out of the billions they have spent, that is a very small percentage,” Hartley said. “If you are an army chief, you have a budget line for bullets, a budget line for uniforms, a budget line for helicopters. You should have a budget line for clearing up at the end.”

There are thousands of Afghan children living with disability as a direct result of mines and other ERWs. Photo via the Afghan Landmine Survivors' Organization.

Cleaning after your mess is not only good manners, it's the moral thing to do, critics said. It should also come with a commitment to the hundreds of victims the departing troops' negligence already caused.

Afghanistan is no fun place to the disabled, even though the country is home to more than one million persons with disabilities — most a direct consequence of the conflict. A shoddy disability law and $100 monthly stipends given out to only some of the disabled are hardly easing the pain.

The physical remnants of war have huge impact on the local community — contaminated fields take away land for farming and grazing, and the casualties of explosions have devastating economic and psychological effects on victims' families.

"Before this issue with ISAF, we already had enough problems in Afghanistan," Rahmatullah Merzayee, a manager at the Afghan Landmine Survivors' Organization, and himself a victim of a landmine, to which he lost both legs, told VICE News. "We hope they accept reality and take some steps. We would like them to do something for the victims."

"It's a shame that ISAF leaves this legacy in Afghanistan, a legacy that will stay for a long time," he added. "Even if they leave Afghanistan, they should consider these people."