

Lebanon war's deadly legacy continues to kill

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Global Research, November 13, 2006

Middle East Online 12 November 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
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Three months after a UN-brokered ceasefire ended the 34-day conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, the fields and olive groves of southern Lebanon remain sewn with a deadly crop — unexploded cluster bombs.

On Friday, farmer Mohammed Rizk became the latest victim of the summer war. Police said he was killed and a companion was wounded as they gathered olives in the village of Kfar Roumman, near Nabatiya.

Since August 14 when hostilities ended, 23 people have been killed and another 136 injured by cluster munitions.

The Israelis fired hundreds of thousands of the bomblets into south Lebanon during the month-long conflict, but according to the UN, clearing them has been made more difficult by Israel not revealing the precise areas they targeted.

It is thought that up to 40 percent of the bombs did not explode when they hit the ground, becoming deadly traps for the unwary since they remain active and can detonate at the slightest movement.

Eight hundred locations have been identified provisionally and 58,000 bomblets have so far been neutralised. But not one of those 800 bomb-strewn sites has been fully cleared yet, says Dalya Farran, spokeswoman for the Mine Action Coordination Centre (MACC), a United Nations programme working in the country with the cooperation of the Beirut government.

Since October 31, 47 foreign-led teams operating under a programme financed by the United Arab Emirates and the UN has been working to clear south Lebanon completely of deadly unexploded munitions by the end of 2007.

The UAE has an unlimited budget to clear an area of 583 square kilometres (233 square miles) in the Nabatiya-Hasbaya-Jezzine area, home to 250,000 people. Two British organisations have been sub-contracted to do some of the work, the UAE's Rashed al-Aryani said.

Financing to clear other areas of south Lebanon has been secured until next June, according to the MACC.

"If the Israelis let us know the areas they targeted, the work could speed up," said Farran. "At the moment, we pinpoint the locations only when alerted by the local population or military."

She added that the cluster munitions used in Lebanon were both Israeli- and US-made.

Israel has not responded to UN requests to identify the areas targeted, nor has it said how many bombs of this kind were launched on Lebanon.

Jan Egeland, the UN's undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs, on Tuesday called "on all states to implement an immediate freeze on the use of cluster munitions".

His appeal came at the beginning of a review conference in Geneva on the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, a global arms treaty restricting some types of conventional munitions that has been ratified by about 100 countries.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) made a similar appeal, also calling for stocks of cluster munitions to be destroyed.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan stopped short of Egeland's outright call for a moratorium, instead urging measures to reduce the harm caused to civilians.

He suggested a freeze on their use near civilian areas and on trade in cluster bombs "that are known to be inaccurate and unreliable".

Frenchman Frederic Gras, who supervises five mine-clearing teams working in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, said that in Lebanon cluster munitions were used mainly in urban areas rather than in open countryside.

"Everywhere I went in urban parts of south Lebanon I found cluster bomblets," he said, adding that clearing such weapons is more difficult in built-up areas.

Cluster munitions use large containers that open to spread dozens of bomblets over a wide area.

According to the war victims aid group Handicap International, 98 percent of cluster bomb victims are civilians. It said that of 11,044 cases recorded in 23 countries, just 125 were military and another 59 were deminers themselves.

South Lebanon's deadly harvest is likely to continue claiming the lives of innocent victims such as olive farmer Mohammed Rizk.

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