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Landmines in Myanmar: No Solution in Sight

By Su-Ann Oh and Veena Nair¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Myanmar places third in number of mine-related casualties in the world, after Colombia and Afghanistan. The majority of landmine casualties are adult civilian males.
- Most landmines in Myanmar are located in the eastern part of the country, reflecting the geography of insurgent warfare.
- Survivors' greatest needs include psychosocial support, livelihood assistance and socioeconomic reintegration. Landmines prevent development by hindering access to land, water sources, roads and health services.
- While the Myanmar Army uses mines to counter guerilla insurgent warfare, non-state armed groups use them to boost their smaller numbers in troops and weapons, and some civilians use them for protection.
- The ceasefire agreements of 2012 and the engagement of armed groups in the nationwide peace negotiations have brought about a reduction in the use of mines. Conversely, in Kachin State where the ceasefire broke down in 2011, new mines are being laid and there has been an increase in mine-related incidents.

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INTRODUCTION

The actual number of landmines in Myanmar is unknown. The only available indicator at present is the number of mine-related casualties. It is estimated that between 1999 and 2014, landmines caused 3,745 casualties.²

In 2014 alone, 45 people were killed and 206 were injured by mines,³ placing Myanmar third, after Colombia and Afghanistan, for the highest casualty rates in the world.⁴ It has to be borne in mind however, that estimates of landmine casualties in Myanmar are unreliable. First, landmines are a sensitive topic due to their association with national security and the military. Second, even though various local organizations collect data, Myanmar has no systematic and organized victim information system.⁵ On top of that, many casualties are not reported.

While it is difficult to ascertain the exact location and number of landmines that have been planted, there is a geographic specificity to their location as shown in the map in Figure 1.⁶ Besides a small area in the western part of the country, a whole swathe of eastern Myanmar (traversing the country longitudinally) is contaminated with landmines. This spread unsurprisingly maps the areas where armed conflict between the military and non-state armed groups (in Tanintharyi State, Mon State, Kayin State, Kayah State, Kachin State and Chin State).

For several decades, the border areas have been (and some continue to be) sites of armed conflict, where the Myanmar Army (*Tatmadaw*) and non-state armed groups (some of which are proxies for the *Tatmadaw*) have endeavoured to seize and maintain territory through military strategy and warfare.

Although anti-personnel landmines have been a common feature of armed conflict in Myanmar since the 1970s, government forces have been using them more intensively since the 1990s.⁷ They have been used as part of the 'four cuts' strategy to counter guerilla warfare by denying insurgents food, funds, recruits and intelligence. Among other uses, landmines have been sown in paddy fields to prevent villagers from using them or harvesting their crops, thus denying insurgent groups these resources.⁸

² International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). *Landmine Monitor Myanmar/Burma 2015*. ICBL, 2015, p. 14. The ICBL has only been documenting landmine use in Myanmar since 1999.

³ Ibid.

⁴ International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). *Landmine Monitor 2015*. International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), 2015, p. 26.

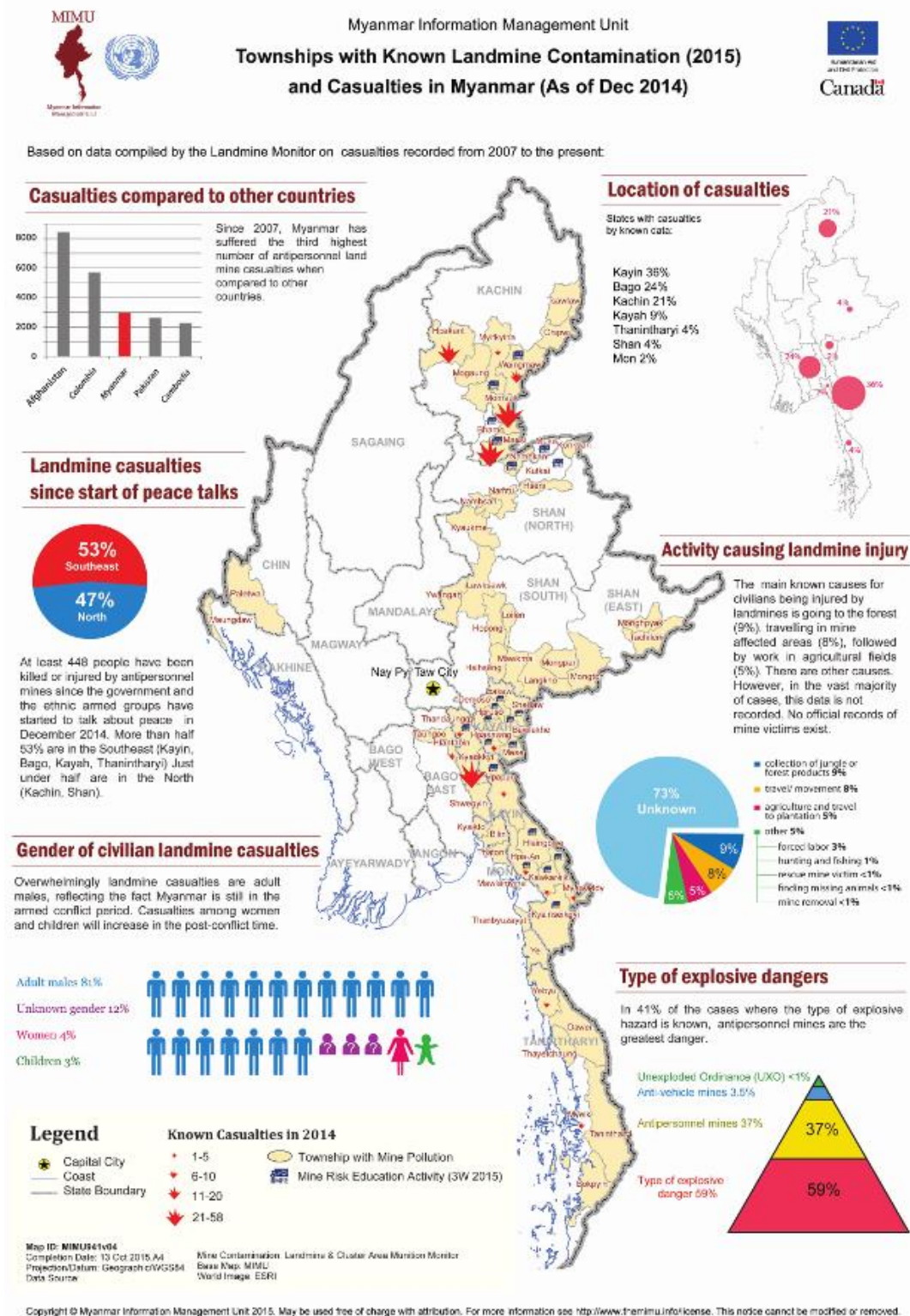
⁵ Roger Fasth and Pascal Simon. "Mine Action in Myanmar". *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* 19, no. 2 (2015). <http://www.jmu.edu/cisr/journal/19.2/special-report/fasth.shtml> (accessed 1 August 2016).

⁶ Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG). *Uncertain Ground: Landmines in Eastern Burma*. Karen Human Rights Group, 2012, p. 32.

⁷ Andrew Selth. *Landmines in Burma: The Military Dimension*. Strategic and Defence Studies Centre Working Paper No. 352. Canberra: ANU, 2000, pp. 3-5.

⁸ Selth. *Landmines in Burma*, 2002, p. 6.

Figure 1. Townships with known Landmine Contamination (2015) and Casualties in Myanmar (as of 2014)



Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit
http://www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Infographic_Landmine_Contamination_Casualties_in_Myanmar_2014_04April2016_A3.pdf

Government forces are not the only party planting landmines. Due to the loss of territory and their smaller numbers in troops and weapons, non-state armed groups have used mines to protect base areas and supply lines, and to restrict the movement of *Tatmadaw* patrols.⁹ In 2011 to 2012, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) in south-eastern¹⁰ Myanmar used mines when attacking government forces, when seeking to deny government forces access to territory, to defend hiding sites for the displaced, to keep supply lines open, and to block the movements of government troops. Many non-state armed groups use handmade mines because of the difficulty in obtaining factory-produced ones.¹¹ Even after the ceasefire was signed between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the government in 2012, both sides were still sowing landmines. In 2014, the KNLA was reported to have planted landmines in Nyaunglebin District to protect themselves from *Tatmadaw* attacks.¹²

Civilians have also used landmines: to stop deforestation and to protect themselves from potential attack.¹³ In 2011, before the ceasefire was signed, some villagers in Lu Thaw Township, Papun District in Kayin/Karen State planted landmines to protect themselves, to enable them to pursue basic livelihood activities and to increase the time they had to escape soldiers. Conversely, civilians not living under comparable security pressures are more likely to view landmines as a threat rather than as protection.¹⁴

LIVES, LIMBS AND LIVELIHOODS

According to information compiled between 2007 and 2014 by the Myanmar Information Management Unit (see Figure 1), the States with the highest proportion of casualties caused by landmines in 2014 were Kayin/Karen State (36 per cent), followed by Bago/Pegu Region (24 per cent) and Kachin State (21 per cent). This correlates with the realities on the ground: Kayin/Karen State and Bago/Pegu Region continue to experience intermittent skirmishes between the KNU/KNLA (and other Karen-related armed groups) and government forces, while armed conflict persists in Kachin State between the Kachin Independence Army and the *Tatmadaw*.

The majority (81 per cent) of landmine casualties were adult males (see Figure 1). A separate survey conducted in Kachin State and Kayah State found that most of the victims

⁹ Selth. *Landmines in Burma*, 2002, p. 5.

¹⁰ The data was collected between January 2011 and May 2012 in seven areas of southeastern Myanmar commonly referred to as “districts” by the KNU and local Karen organisations. See KHRG. *Uncertain Ground*, 2012, p. 15.

¹¹ KHRG. *Uncertain Ground*, 2012, pp. 22-23.

¹² KHRG. *Nyaunglebin Field Report: Changes since ceasefire, the land conflicts and local civilians concerns with military activities, January to December 2014*. 29 July 2016.

<http://khr.org/2016/07/15-3-f1/nyaunglebin-field-report-changes-ceasefire-land-conflicts-and-local-civilians> (accessed 1 August 2016).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ KHRG. *Uncertain Ground*, 2012, pp. 81-87.

in 2015 were civilians¹⁵ and that mine incidents occur when villagers travel, forage for vegetables and/or gather wood in forested areas.¹⁶ Often they are aware of the dangers but persist in conducting these activities out of necessity. Villagers displaced from their homes by armed conflict who return to areas of ongoing or recent conflict where landmines have been planted are most at risk.¹⁷

In 1993, the US State Department estimated that more than 1500 people in Myanmar were fitted with artificial limbs as a result of landmine explosions.¹⁸ In 2013, 44 per cent of the prostheses delivered by the Red Cross to rehabilitation centres in Myanmar were to mine victims. This proportion rose to 49 per cent in 2014, and fell to 43 per cent in 2015.¹⁹

The impact of such injuries and deaths is brutal and devastating. First, victims often do not have rapid access to medical treatment. There is often a lack of available or affordable healthcare in landmine-contaminated areas. In many cases, they have to be carried over difficult terrain to distant medical facilities to be attended to. Second, many survivors struggle to make a livelihood while coping with injuries and the debts incurred from obtaining medical care. Third, many suffer adverse physical and psychological trauma from their injury.²⁰ In fact, a survey of survivors and victim assistance organizations suggests that survivors' greatest needs include psychosocial support, livelihood assistance and socioeconomic reintegration.²¹

In certain areas, villagers are forced to abandon cultivable land and harvest-ready crops to avoid landmine-related death or injury. Livestock are sometimes lamed or killed by landmines and have had to be butchered immediately. This affects the livelihood of the owners.²²

The cost of landmines goes beyond that of injury, death, and trauma. Landmines prevent development by hindering access to land, water sources, roads and health services. In 2008, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines reported that a mission from the Myanmar Ministry of Home Affairs sent to inspect sites for development found the area littered with landmines. Since a large-scale mine removal exercise would have been necessary, plans to develop the area were suspended.²³

¹⁵ Fasth and Simon. *Mine Action in Myanmar*, 2015.

¹⁶ Fasth and Simon. *Mine Action in Myanmar*, 2015; KHRG. *Uncertain Ground*, 2012, p. 69.

¹⁷ KHRG. *Uncertain Ground*, 2012, p. 68.

¹⁸ Selth. *Landmines in Burma*, 2002, p. 7.

¹⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). *ICRC Annual Report 2013*. Geneva: ICRC, 2014, p. 294. <https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/annual-report/current/icrc-annual-report-myanmar.pdf>; *ICRC Annual Report 2014*. Geneva: ICRC, 2015, p. 293.

<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/annual-report-2015-icrc>; *ICRC Annual Report 2015*. Geneva: ICRC, 2016, p. 348. <https://app.icrc.org/files/2015-annual-report/> (all accessed 1 August 2016).

²⁰ KHRG. *Uncertain Ground*, 2012, pp. 70-71.

²¹ Fasth and Simon. *Mine Action in Myanmar*, 2015.

²² KHRG. *Uncertain Ground*, 2012, pp. 30.

²³ Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan. "Anti-personnel landmines in Myanmar: a cause of displacement and an obstacle to return". *Humanitarian Practice Network*. December 2008.

Landmines also prevent displaced people from returning to their villages and to claiming farmland. There are an estimated 110,000 displaced people in the south-eastern border of Myanmar and 98,000 in Kachin State and northern Shan State.²⁴ Thailand alone hosts at least 100,000 refugees.²⁵ Their eventual return will bring about an increased number of casualties if the landmines are not removed first.

One of the benefits of the ceasefire agreements of 2012 and the peace negotiations with armed groups is that the use of anti-personnel mines by non-state armed groups and the *Tatmadaw* has decreased significantly.²⁶ However, it is believed that the number of women and children casualties will increase in the 'post-conflict' era since mobility restrictions have been reduced. Furthermore, the opening up of previously closed parts of the country has increased the risk of tourists being injured. In April this year, while travelling in north Myanmar, two German tourists and their local guide were wounded by shrapnel from a landmine.²⁷

Conversely, where the 17-year ceasefire in Kachin State has broken down, it is believed that there has been an increase in landmine explosions. According to data from the Danish Demining Group, 90 per cent of recorded explosions occurred in the last four years, and 60 per cent in the last two years. The number of mine accidents recorded in 2014 was three times that in 2013.²⁸

A POLITICAL MINEFIELD

The obvious solution to this problem is to ban the production and laying of mines and to demine contaminated areas. In 2012, then President Thein Sein requested international help for clearing mines. Consequently, the Myanmar Mine Action Centre (MMAC) was established within the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC).²⁹ In early 2013, it led to the drafting

<http://odihpn.org/magazine/anti-personnel-landmines-in-myanmar-a-cause-of-displacement-and-an-obstacle-to-return/> (accessed 1 August 2016).

²⁴ The Border Consortium. *Protection and Security Concerns in South East Burma/Myanmar*. Bangkok: The Border Consortium, 2014, p. 14; Reliefweb. *Myanmar: Kachin and Northern Shan CCCM Dashboard (1/Jan/2015)* <http://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-kachin-northern-shan-cccm-dashboard-1jan2015> (accessed 1 August 2016).

²⁵ The Border Consortium. *Refugee and IDP Camp Populations June 2016*. <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/media/71224/2016-06-jun-map-tbc-unhcr.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2016).

²⁶ ICBL. *Landmine Monitor 2015*, p. 9.

²⁷ Channel News Asia. *Myanmar landmine blast wounds German tourists, guide*. 27 April 2016. <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/myanmar-landmine-blast/2735932.html> (accessed 1 August 2016)

²⁸ Fasth and Simon. *Mine Action in Myanmar*, 2015.

²⁹ The Myanmar Peace Centre was established by the Government of Myanmar as part of an agreement with the Norway-led Peace Support Donor Group to assist the Union Peace-making Central Committee and the Union Peace-making Work Committee in coordinating all peace initiatives and as a platform for stakeholders to meet and negotiate. See <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/stakeholders/myanmar-peace-center> (accessed 1 August 2016).

of national mine action standards with the support of in-country international organizations for mine action. However, on completing the national standards, the MPC, reflecting the government's stance, switched its focus to the nationwide ceasefire agreement negotiations, claiming that the agreement was a precondition for marking, surveying and clearance operations.

At the end of August, the government held the second meeting of the peace negotiations (the Union Peace Conference, also known as the 21st century Panglong Conference). It was the first time these negotiations were held under the National League of Democracy-led government. This process, which began under Thein Sein's government five years ago, is expected to take time to conclude.

The new government has been urged to sign the international Mine Ban Treaty and to stop the use of landmines.³⁰ There may be political will here – Aung San Suu Kyi has previously endorsed the treaty – but the NLD is encumbered by a lack of control over the military.

On the part of non-state armed groups, there are, at present, four bilateral ceasefires that include demining or consideration of mine action. Deeds of commitment have been signed declaring a ban on the use of landmines between Geneva Call, an international NGO, and some ethnic armed organizations.³¹

Nevertheless, there is still no general agreement on how to deal with landmines. Commentators argue that more dialogue and discussion are required to determine models of clearance, risk education and support for landmine survivors. In particular, the details relating to authority, responsibilities, coordination, technical capacity, assessment, building consensus and how they may be integrated within bilateral and draft national ceasefires require further consideration.³²

Meanwhile, international organizations have expressed frustration at not being able to clear mines, pointing out that there are areas of land that can be cleared without any loss of defensive or strategic value for parties involved. Although international organizations have not cleared a single mine since 2012, there have been some efforts made by local groups.³³ Norwegian People's Aid, one of the mine action organizations in Myanmar, has also declared that it is highly unusual that the mapping of mines is not being allowed during the

³⁰ Moe Myint. "New Government Urged to Act on Landmines in Burma". *The Irrawaddy*. 5 April 2016. <http://www.irrawaddy.com/burma/new-government-urged-act-landmines-burma.html> (accessed 1 August 2016).

³¹ Gregory Cathcart. "Myanmar's minefields". *New Mandala*. 12 October 2015. <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2015/10/12/myanmars-minefields/> (accessed 1 August 2016).

³² Ibid.

³³ Dominique Mosbergen. "Deadly Landmines Bring Terror To Millions In Myanmar". *The Huffington Post*. 15 March 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/myanmar-landmines_us_56cbf830e4b041136f182e9c (accessed 1 August 2016).

peace process. Lack of trust between all parties concerned may be the cause.³⁴ This is not surprising though, given that Myanmar's history of ceasefires is one of political stasis rather than peace.

What international organizations are allowed to work on at this stage are victim assistance and mine risk education (MRE). The Department of Social Welfare in the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement set up a Mine Risk Education Working Group in 2012, bringing together government departments, UN agencies in Myanmar, and national and international organizations conducting mine risk education and victim assistance.³⁵

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³⁴ Guy Dinmore. "Three years, zero landmines cleared". *The Myanmar Times*. 14 July 2015. <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/in-depth/15486-three-years-zero-landmines-cleared.html> (accessed 1 August 2016).

³⁵ Fasth and Simon. *Mine Action in Myanmar*, 2015.