



WEAPON CONTAMINATION



ICRC

IN BRIEF



THE PROBLEM

Contamination from unexploded and abandoned weapons continues to kill and maim people, block access to basic necessities and hinder reconciliation for years or even decades after the last shot has been fired. The exact nature of the threat posed by these weapons varies depending on the nature of the conflict and the weapons used. In addition to explosive remnants of war such as grenades, mortars, cluster munitions, bombs and missiles, the problem often encompasses unstable or insecure ammunition stockpiles and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. To reflect this reality, the term 'weapon contamination' is used by the ICRC as an umbrella term for all operational activities aimed at reducing the resultant impact on the civilian population.

Weapon contamination may have the immediate impact of hindering the return of civilians to their homes and the delivery of aid. In the longer term it may prevent the repair and reconstruction of infrastructure such as schools and hospitals, roads, wells, markets and agricultural land. In south-east Asia, for example, the problem of weapon contamination continues to have an impact on people more than 30 years after the end of the conflict.



Boris Cerina/ICRC



aulGrabhorn/ICRC

THE ICRC'S RESPONSE

The work of the ICRC in response to weapon contamination is directly related to the organization's mandate to protect civilians from the effects of conflict. Over the last decade the ICRC has established itself as a leading actor in this field. The organization undertakes a wide range of effective interventions, including the provision of medical treatment, physical rehabilitation and economic assistance to victims, the promotion of international norms, and the implementation of activities to prevent injuries and reduce the socio-economic impact of living in contaminated areas.

The ICRC is often present during conflicts, meaning it is usually one of the first organizations to provide relief and assistance immediately after a conflict has come to an end. It is therefore well positioned to respond to the needs of the civilian population and to take an integrated approach in its response to the complex and often poorly understood needs of weapon-contamination victims and their families. Depending on the context, civilians may require information on the dangers posed by contamination as they attempt to re-build their lives, or assistance with alternative ways to obtain basic necessities such as water, fuel or food if it is too dangerous to return to their usual sources. Health care and emergency medical treatment can be provided to those injured as a result of weapon contamination. The ICRC can also deploy specialist teams to clear contaminated areas, either in direct support of ICRC operations or in order to protect civilians.



WEAPON CONTAMINATION UNIT

The weapon contamination unit provides the ICRC with operational expertise on landmines, explosive remnants of war, stockpiles and small arms. The unit is responsible for activities to reduce the impact of weapon contamination on people. These may include field assessments on weapon use, risk education, clearance, and information gathering. The unit directly implements activities in the field, advises and provides technical support to other units within the ICRC, and plays a lead role within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

During conflicts and immediately post-conflict, the unit seeks to ensure that ICRC delegations are able to assess and respond to the humanitarian impact of weapon contamination, including potential security implications for ICRC staff. In the longer term, post-conflict, the unit supports delegations and National Societies in the development of appropriate assistance or protection activities which respond to the needs of the affected population.



Marc Bouvier/ICRC



Marc Bouvier/ICRC

A range of possible interventions

Weapon contamination often means civilians have to place themselves at risk in order to survive. The ICRC undertakes a range of activities to minimize the impact of weapon contamination on affected populations and to ensure a rapid and effective response.

Clearance

Immediately following the end of hostilities, the ICRC is often on the ground before other organizations are able to set up and begin working. In such situations, unexploded or badly stored explosive remnants of war can present a serious threat both to the local population and to ICRC teams. Depending on the context, teams can deploy as part of the ICRC's rapid deployment plan, or work directly with delegations. Clearance teams provide technical analysis and needs assessment, and remove or destroy items in contaminated areas. ICRC teams are able to clear and make safe key buildings and infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and water pumping stations, to allow post-conflict rehabilitation to start and essential services to be restored. If clearance is not possible, or not an immediate priority, these teams can mark off dangerous areas and warn people not to enter them.

The ICRC – owing to its wide acceptance in the field, its neutrality and its independence – can access areas that are off-limits to other



Mathieu Lartuelle/ICRC

Violaine Des Postelles/ICRC

organizations. The ICRC can therefore also undertake clearance activities – helping to make safe areas that other organizations cannot reach.

Risk reduction

Access to basic necessities such as water or firewood is often hindered by the presence of unexploded ordnance or mines. The ICRC can provide interim solutions that will protect people until the area is cleared and the threat removed. The ICRC repairs and upgrades infrastructure such as water points, and supports schools and health centres in contaminated areas.

Weapon contamination can have a serious economic, social or environmental impact. In areas where farmland is contaminated, the ICRC supports the development of alternative means of earning a living, or helps affected communities develop agricultural and livestock activities in safe areas. When children have nowhere safe to play as a

result of weapon contamination, the ICRC builds and maintains safe play areas so parents know that their children can have fun in a secure environment.

The ICRC provides micro-grants to reduce forced risk-taking. Economic need drives people to farm in areas that are suspected to be contaminated, or to salvage unexploded weapons for scrap metal. Through these grants, people can undertake other income-generating activities such as animal husbandry, tailoring and baking.

Protection-led risk reduction interventions

Prior to, during and after a conflict, the ICRC reminds authorities of their obligations under international treaties such as the Mine Ban Convention and the Convention on Cluster Munitions. In ongoing conflicts, the ICRC makes representations to parties to the conflict concerning the use of weapons, in an attempt to reduce the impact on the civilian population.



Violaine Des Rostais/ICRC

Risk education

During conflicts and immediately post-conflict, the ICRC provides information to the civilian population about known and suspected danger areas, and how they can best keep themselves and their loved ones safe. The grassroots networks of National Societies can also play a key role in raising awareness of dangerous areas and promoting low-risk behaviour, both in the short term and for as long as the problem exists.

Information gathering

Information concerning the location, date and time of accidents can be crucial to help minimize the possibility of future accidents, and also helps prioritize clearance activities. The ICRC collects, collates and uses this information to make programming decisions, and also shares it with other agencies such as clearance and victim-assistance organizations. In the longer term, National Societies play a crucial role in collecting this information.

Capacity building

The ICRC also helps build national capacity to respond effectively to weapon contamination. By supporting National Societies or other national bodies, such as the government body tasked with coordinating weapon contamination activities, the ICRC can help develop and support long-term solutions to weapon contamination.

Mission

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance.

The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles.

Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.



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© ICRC, January 2010

4022/002 01.2010 2,000