Statement

On the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action

We Are Still Discovering New Areas Contaminated With Landmines in Syria, With More Deaths and Injuries Recorded Across the Country

A total of 3,471 civilians, including 919 children, have been documented as killed by anti-personnel landmines in Syria since 2011

Thursday 04 April 2024

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.
April 4 is observed annually as the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action. On this date, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) releases a report as both a remainder and a periodic update of the numbers of civilian deaths resulting from anti-personnel landmine (APLs) explosions across Syria, as well as to reiterate our warnings of the fatal threat posed by these horrific and indiscriminate weapons that have contaminated large swathes of the Syrian land today, and which will pose a threat on Syrian lives for decades to come.

APLs are classified as prohibited weapons under international law. The Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction, commonly known as the Ottawa Convention, acts as the main legal instrument concerning this issue. The Ottawa Convention, which came into effect in March 1999, has been ratified by the overwhelming majority of nations worldwide, with 164 state parties today. As such, the prohibition of the use of landmines is classified as an international custom that is binding on all states which are involved in and parties to a conflict, whether or not they ratified the Convention.

The armed conflict in Syria is one of the world’s worst conflicts in terms of the disregard shown for the rules of international law, particularly by the Syrian regime, which has used tens of thousands of landmines. It should be noted, however, that the low cost and ease of manufacturing landmines have also enabled other parties to the conflict to use these munitions excessively without showing any concern for their removal or even for disclosing their locations, which is glaringly evident in those governorates that have seen clashes between and changes in the controlling forces.

For the past 13 years, SNHR has been documenting the use of APLs, including the explosions of cluster munition remnants, and the resulting casualties. While the Syrian regime had used landmines before 2011, the use of landmines increased exponentially and massively after the start of the popular uprising in March 2011, which subsequently turned into an internal armed conflict. Since the end of 2011, the Syrian regime has planted landmines along the borders with Lebanon and Türkiye, without placing adequate warnings. According to our monitoring, while many of the parties to the conflict and controlling forces have used APLs, only two parties have used cluster munitions whose remnants remain, namely the Syrian regime and Russian forces.

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1. Was declared in UN General Assembly resolution 60/97 adopted on December 8, 2005. For the full text, see: https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/60/97
2. For the full text, see: https://geneva-s3.unoda.org/static-unoda-site/pages/templates/anti-personnel-landmines-convention/APLC%2BEnglish.pdf
4. We generally use the term ‘the Syrian regime’ rather than ‘the Syrian government’, because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is that of a totalitarian dictatorship where power is concentrated in the hands of a small circle of individuals, namely the President of the Republic and the heads of the regime’s security apparatus. As a result, the ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, play a restricted, largely ceremonial role, which is limited to implementing precisely what the ruling regime orders, with no real decision-making power or active role of their own. Syria is under autocratic/family rule, with no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade merely for show. The Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he supposedly presides. The Minister of Justice cannot even summon a low-ranking security office, let alone a security branch head. Syria is ruled by the president assisted by the heads of the security branches.

While we are aware that the United Nations and its agencies use the term ‘the Syrian government’, we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

5. APLs are defined as a type of munition designed to be installed above or below the ground, which are triggered and detonated when either a person or a vehicle touches or approaches them. In accordance with this definition, live cluster munition remnants that have not yet exploded are considered APLs, since they bear similar characteristics in that they may potentially explode at any moment should an object touch them. In fact, approximately 10-40 percent of cluster submunitions do not explode at the time of the attack. Those can explode at any moment once they are touched. As such, they are effectively landmines.


7. Although we recorded no instances of the US-led International Coalition forces and Russian forces using landmines.
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In their latest report released in November 2023, our partners at the Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor and Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC) noted that approximately 51 percent of all deaths from this cause documented around the world in 2022 took place in Syria, meaning that Syria saw the highest number of deaths by APLs worldwide for the third consecutive year.

SNHR, as a member of the ICBL-CMC Coalition, has been recording the use of cluster munitions and APLs in Syria for 13 years to date, and regularly supplies the ICBL-CMC with data documented by our teams on the ground in the country. In fact, we believe dozens of minefields have yet to be discovered in Syria. As a member of the ICBL-CMC, SNHR reiterates its commitment to working towards a world free of the use of landmines and cluster munitions.

Map showing areas contaminated with anti-personnel landmines due to operations by parties to the conflict from March 2011 to April 2024

With large swathes of Syrian territory having been mined, we have utilized SNHR’s databases, including the one concerning the victims of landmines and cluster munitions, to create a number of maps showing the approximate locations of areas which we believe have been contaminated with APLs in many Syrian governorates. The mines and unexploded munitions in these areas will continue to pose a threat to the lives and movement of Syrian citizens, especially children, for decades to come. We designed those maps in an attempt to assist the work of local unexploded ordnance teams working to defuse the mines, and to raise awareness among local residents and authorities of the need to take the necessary precautions to avoid new incidents. We have included detailed maps of many Syrian governorates in our extensive report released on this date, April 4, last year, 2023, which was entitled, ‘On the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action: Landmines Continue to Plague Large Areas of Syria and Threaten the Lives of Millions’. To ensure that this statement is kept to a manageable length, we will only include the comprehensive maps:

8. These maps show the approximate location of areas that saw victims killed by landmine explosions. Due to the nature of the use of landmines, a large number of landmines are usually planted in one area, forming what is known as a minefield, or distributed in the form of two parallel lines, or by-traps. As such, we suspect that extensive areas in the vicinity of each location marked on the map might be contaminated with landmines. It should be noted that, when creating those maps, we pinpointed one point for each neighborhood, town, or area, regardless of the number of deaths recorded in this area as a result of a landmine explosion, in light of the massive number of victims. We tried, as much as possible, to ensure that the maps accurately show those areas with the highest death tolls. It is important to note that these maps contain only what we have been able to document, and, thus, reflect the bare minimum of incidents or potential danger.

9. The maps we have created show areas which we suspect are contaminated with munition remnants, submunitions, and bomblets left from cluster munitions attacks. It should be noted that those areas marked on the maps reflect only the cluster munitions attacks we have been able to document and the resulting deaths from the explosion of submunitions. As such, they reflect the bare minimum of the scope of the dispersion of those submunitions. We have faced various challenges in creating these maps which affect, in one way or another: the accuracy of the process of pinpointing those areas. We tried insofar as possible to design those maps in a way that show the areas that saw the highest frequencies of attacks and deaths. For more details on those challenges see: Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). (2023. January 31). Cluster Munitions Remnants are an Open-Ended Threat to the Lives of Syria’s Future Generations. https://snhr.org/?p=59103
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Map showing locations where cluster munition remnants left by Syrian-Russian alliance forces are scattered. From July 2012 to April 2024.
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About 3,500 civilians killed and over 10,000 injured in hundreds of landmine explosions in Syria since March 2011

SNHR has documented the deaths of at least 3,471 civilians; including 919 children, 356 women, seven civil defense personnel, eight medical personnel, and nine media workers in hundreds of anti-personnel landmine explosions in Syria since March 2011 up until April 4, 2024, or International Day for Mine Awareness 2024.

These are divided into:

- 3,086 civilians; including 794 children, 325 women, seven civil defense personnel, eight medical personnel, and nine media workers; were killed by landmine explosions.
- 385 civilians, including 125 children and 31 women, were killed by cluster munitions remnants explosions since the first documented use of these weapons in July 2012.

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10. Hundreds of unexploded cluster bomblets have effectively turned into landmines. Approximately 10-40 percent of cluster submunitions do not explode at the time of the attack in which they’re deployed, but might subsequently do so at any moment once triggered. As such, they effectively turn into landmines. Those remnants are still heavily scattered across Syria as shown in the maps designed by SNHR, and the fact that we are still recording civilian deaths resulting from cluster remnants explosions. We face special challenges in definitively attributing culpability in such deaths to either of the two parties to which we assign responsibility for attacks involving the use of cluster munitions, namely the Syrian regime and Russian forces. As such, we attribute culpability in cases of killing by the explosion of cluster munition remnants to the Syrian-Russian alliance.

11. Since the first documented use of cluster munitions in Syria, in July 2012, SNHR has been building a database specifically dedicated to the documentation of cluster munition attacks, feeling that this type of attack warrants special attention. SNHR’s teams work tirelessly to ensure, if possible, that the type of munitions used in each attack, as well as the containers (both rockets and shells) carrying the cluster munitions, and the quantity of submunitions contained in each, are correctly identified. Carrying out this exacting work also helps in subsequently estimating the areas that have been contaminated by unexploded cluster bomb submunitions or bomblets. We also focus on identifying the launching platforms used or the airbases from which the warplanes that carried out the airborne attacks took off. According to the data we’ve collected through monitoring to date, the Syrian regime and Russian forces are the only parties that have used cluster munitions in Syria. Those attacks have been carried out using rockets or shells containing dozens/hundreds of submunitions that were dropped from warplanes or fired from launching platforms believed to be stationed in the Mediterranean Sea or via rocket launchers. We have tried to distinguish between the attacks carried out by the Russian regime and the Syrian regime as much as possible.
As for injuries:
Landmines have inflicted dreadful disfigurement and serious injuries on civilians. In any landmine explosion, it’s usual for hundreds of fragments to penetrate the victim’s body, possibly resulting in amputation and the rupturing of cells, arteries and blood vessels, not to mention eye and ear injuries. Even though it is difficult to accurately determine the number of victims injured as a result of landmine explosions in Syria, we estimate that at least 10,400 civilians have been injured, with many having to undergo amputation of limbs as a result, and now being in need of artificial limbs and rehabilitation and support programs. Therefore, the continuing presence of landmines continues to pose a major obstacle to the work and return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), as well as the work of relief workers, Civil Defense personnel, and to their equipment, not to mention to the process of reconstruction and development.

It must be stressed that the continuing deaths and injuries resulting from landmine explosions show the rampant use of this indiscriminate weapon by the various parties to the conflict in Syria. This also shows that there are still many areas which are contaminated with landmines that are yet to be discovered. Furthermore, all the parties involved in the conflict have failed to provide maps disclosing the locations of landmines, and to seriously work on removing them. Landmines are indiscriminate weapons prohibited by international law, with their sole aim being to create fear and mass terror. Landmines clearly violate the principle of distinction between civilian and military targets, as well as the principles of precautions and proportionality in attacks. The disregard for those rules constitutes a war crime according to international humanitarian law and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Lastly, the UN Security Council bears the primary responsibility for the state of chronic insecurity that Syria has reached due to its utter and abject failure to protect civilians in the country for the past 13 years and to bring about a political transition process until now. As long as the conflict continues, chaos, violations, and prohibited acts will continue to run rampant. SNHR reiterates that Syria will not see stability and security without a political transition to rule by democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which in turn cannot be achieved without a strict timetable and serious and effective efforts and pressures.

We call on the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), the UN Security Council, and the international community to greatly increase their logistical assistance to the local organizations and police working to detect and disarm landmines, to train Syrian organizations on removing landmines and unexploding cluster munitions, to raise local awareness on these types of danger, to work on pinpointing the most prominent locations where landmines were planted, and to allocate sizeable funds to removing landmines left by the Syrian conflict from the UN fund provided for the removal of landmines in order to contribute to the removal of landmines in Syria, especially in areas where the ruling authorities show willingness to undertake this mission in a transparent and honest way.

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