

**Explosive remnants of war and light weapons:
A daily battle for Libya**



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Key Facts and Figures

On February 17, 2011, the uprising in Libya engendered extreme violence between the forces of Muammar Gaddafi (then head of state) and his opponents. The protest movement led to a bloody repression leaving thousands dead or injured. Landmines (anti-personnel and anti-vehicle) and cluster munitions were used during the conflict, putting the civilian population in danger.

On October 20, 2011, Sirte, the last bastion of the old regime, fell and Colonel Gaddafi was killed. The National Transitional Council provisionally took over governance of the country.

Three years later, danger is still very much present in the country, which remains politically unstable. As well as the threat from mines and explosive remnants of war, there are also a huge number of light weapons of all types in the hands of civilians. The proportion of children and young adults among the victims of these weapons is frightening. Since June 2012, more than three-quarters of the recorded victims in the hospitals in Tripoli were younger than 25 years old.

Context

As early as March 2011, the association launched an emergency response mission in Libya. Objective: to raise awareness amongst endangered populations about the risks of the explosive remnants¹ of war (ERW) strewn across the ground in combat zones, homes, schools and public spaces etc. The association is gradually extending its activities to include raising civilians' awareness of the risks posed by the small arms and light weapons to which they now have access, by passing on information on the behavior to adopt and safety rules to follow, in order to limit accidents.

Since October 2011, Handicap International's teams have taken on new challenges with the implementation of ERW and mine clearance actions² and actions to destroy explosive remnants of war in Tripoli, and then in Sirte and now in Misrata.



Handicap International in Libya - February 2014

- . **38 employees including 10 expatriates** work for the association in Libya
- . **30 km²**, or nearly 4,000 soccer fields, of land made safe and returned to the population
- . **More than 117,000 explosive remnants of war destroyed**: two schools, a public garden and 27 farms have been demined and are newly accessible to the population
- . **More than 1,000 dangerous areas** identified thanks to a telephone hotline
- . **More than 110,000 people**, most of them children, have been **made aware** of the dangers of explosive remnants of war and of the handling of light weapons
- . **More than 240,000 leaflets** distributed in cities in the North of the country (Tripoli, Misrata, Sirte, Benghazi, Ajdabiya, Brega)
- . **More than 900 Libyans trained** in methods for raising awareness of populations threatened by mines and other unexploded ordnance
- . **7 local associations** from Benghazi and Brega have been trained to create a network to continue this work
- . The association has carried out interventions in **four hospitals in Tripoli and Misrata**. More than 100 members of the medical staff have been trained in accident prevention and awareness raising for the local population.

¹ Explosive remnants of war are unexploded ordnance, such as sub-munitions, shells, mortars, grenades etc. Since the explosive charge is still active, these devices can explode at any moment and threaten the lives of civil populations, even in peacetime.

² Mine clearance operations consist of identifying explosive remnants of war, marking their location and removing or destroying them.

Testimony

"Many civilians unknowingly expose themselves to danger on a daily basis"



Frederic Maio, Desk Officer for Handicap International's Libya program

Are explosive remnants of war still threatening Libyans?

People's first reaction at the end of fighting is to go home. In this still very fragile country, hundreds of thousands of displaced people have returned home to areas that were bombarded or mined. For these people, there is danger everywhere. Even today, families are still finding explosive remnants of war in their homes, their gardens, their living rooms. Numerous civilians unwittingly expose themselves to danger. Some of them are even tempted to salvage the metal or the explosives from abandoned bombs. This type of behavior is very dangerous and illustrates the daily need to destroy these weapons and raise awareness among civilians of the risk they represent.

The rebellion against Gaddafi's regime also led to an uncontrolled influx of light weapons, which has considerably increased the number of accidents. The general instability in the country and the lack of control from institutions such as the police, have engendered a feeling of insecurity amongst the population, who feel they have to own weapons to ensure their own protection. However, civilians are not used to handling weapons. They are regularly used to express people's happiness, even at weddings where guests engage in celebratory gunfire! This often leads to accidents, frequently involving children and adolescents, which shows how vital it is to continue our work to secure munitions stockpiles, and to continue raising awareness and spreading risk prevention messages, as we are currently doing in Misrata.

What are Handicap International's objectives in Libya for 2014?

In 2013, the association stepped up clearance activities with the deployment of two new demining teams in an area near Misrata that is heavily contaminated following the destruction of over 40 warehouses containing munitions of all types. This has made it possible to limit the risk of accidents. It is a long-term undertaking and we need to increase our efforts in 2014, but we need some funds to finish clearing these warehouses. This year, we have two priority actions: to reinforce awareness-raising about the danger of weapons, both to control the presence of mines and ERW and to prevent accidents involving small arms and light weapons; and finally to build the capacities of a local organization, which will be able to take on and carry forward all our activities when we are no longer present. It is a priority for Handicap International to ensure the long-term sustainability of our actions, so that our efforts outlive our presence and the country is able to tackle these challenges itself.



Our Actions

Unexploded Ordnance clearance

Hotline



The association has two teams in Misrata dedicated to removing any unexploded ordnance that threatens the population. A hotline was set up in 2012 to facilitate the identification of contaminated areas, which allows inhabitants to report any concerns and trigger an expert intervention. At the height of its intervention, Handicap international had deployed four demining teams in Tripoli, Misrata and Sirte.

Mine clearance of over 40 warehouses



Two other Handicap International teams were working to demine a weapons and munitions stockpile near Misrata, made up of over 40 warehouses³ which were bombed by NATO during the Libyan civil war and destroyed. Thousands of munitions and unexploded ordnance were scattered over an area of almost 1.5km² around the site in neighbouring communities, which were cleared by Handicap International teams who removed almost 200 explosive items. Handicap International was taking action to limit the number of accidents and to remove munitions that

have been abandoned on the ground, or hidden in the debris of the warehouses. The association estimates that it will take another 18 months to clear the area of unexploded ordnance.

³ These munitions warehouses were bunkers that were partially destroyed by bombing.

Risk education

Mines and explosive remnants of war



As early as March 2011, even before the end of the fighting, Handicap International had already begun work in the country to raise the awareness of threatened populations to the mortal danger of mines and explosive remnants of war, by demonstrating the simple safety rules that need to be followed in order to avoid accidents (do not approach an unfamiliar object, do not touch it, mark the area and alert the authorities).

In 2012 and 2013, the association increased its awareness raising activities amongst the at-risk populations in Tripoli and Sirte. The association is still working in Misrata today. Handicap International has trained local representatives (teachers, health care professionals in hospitals, imams, business leaders etc.) who will become spokespeople, passing on risk prevention messages to their communities.

The association is also working directly in schools and mosques, with the local authorities and local associations to make the appropriate recommendations and to prevent accidents.

Finally, Handicap International's teams distribute awareness-raising materials that use simple images, accessible to all, showing the simple safety rules that need to be followed. Risk prevention campaigns are also being widely publicised on the radio and through billboards and posters.

Raising awareness about light weapons



The opening up of weapon stockpiles belonging to Gaddafi's armed force's lead to an unquantifiable influx of small arms and light weapons. Most families have at least one firearm at home.

Tragic figures:

- In 2012, four victims of light weapons were recorded every day in Tripoli.
- Since June 2012, more than three quarters of the recorded victims in hospitals in Tripoli have been younger than 25 years old, and 15% have been under the age of 16.

In response to this threat, the association is carrying out awareness-raising activities on the dangers of handling weapons and teaching safety rules that will limit accidents (do not let children carry weapons, do not shoot in the air during demonstrations or parties, and ensure the safety catch when the weapon is not in use). Handicap International is working in Misrata to train school teachers and civil society organizations and is heading up direct awareness-raising sessions for the affected populations.