



European Union
Civil Protection and
Humanitarian Aid



EXPLOSIVE HAZARD CONTAMINATION IN NORTHWEST SYRIA AND ITS IMPACT

WEBINAR SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2020

12:00 – 13:30 GMT

SUMMARY

Northwest Syria remains a region still in conflict, across opposition-controlled areas of Idlib and western Aleppo, and Turkish-administered areas of northern Aleppo. Ongoing hostilities continue to expose civilians to multiple protection risks, including protracted displacement and lack of access to basic services. The dire conditions for civilians living in northwest Syria are further exacerbated by an explosive ordnance contamination emergency. Unexploded bombs, cluster munitions and improvised explosive devices pose an additional hazard in what is already one of the world's largest and most complex humanitarian crises.

For the past two years, The HALO Trust has worked with national NGO partners to assess almost 1,000 towns and villages in the Idlib, Aleppo and Afrin districts of northwest Syria. This has led to the first comprehensive understanding of explosive ordnance contamination across northwest Syria which is now documented in a [HALO report](#).

To mark the report's release and to raise awareness of the humanitarian issues linked to explosive hazard contamination, HALO, the Netherlands and ECHO co-hosted a webinar meeting. 42 participants from 23 organisations and governments participated in the event.

The meeting explored the current response delivered by HALO and its implementing partners and future needs for mine action programming in northwest Syria. Participants also discussed the operational challenges facing mine action implementers in northwest Syria as well as the ways and means of working through local partnerships. Participants agreed that despite the ongoing nature of the conflict and the absence of a durable ceasefire, explosive ordnance contamination presents an immediate threat for civilians and the continuation of mine action intervention is essential.

Participants also acknowledged the intersectionality of mine action work, overlapping with protection and health sectors, and agreed that more could be done to mainstream the mine action response within wider humanitarian programming.

“Civilians are unaware of the hidden threat of explosive ordnance contamination which awaits them in their home areas.”

THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN NORTHWEST SYRIA: A BLEAK PICTURE

- 1 The whole of Syria faces a massive protection and displacement crisis: 12 million people from all of Syria are displaced, 50% of these people are within Syria, the majority in Idlib. The displacement is affecting all communities across northwest Syria, and although host communities are mobilising to support IDPs, any influx of people adds pressure on already strained resources and infrastructures.
- 2 Living conditions for Internally Displaced People (IDP) in northwest Syria are appalling: most are forced to shelter either in abandoned buildings and building sites, or overcrowded IDP camps. As a result of these conditions, significant numbers of IDPs are preferring instead to return to their homes in front lines areas, despite the risk of frequent shelling from the ongoing conflict. These civilians are also unaware of the hidden threat of explosive ordnance contamination which awaits them in their home areas.

“As a result of appalling conditions, significant numbers of IDPs are preferring to return to their homes in front lines areas, despite the risk.”

ACCESS CHALLENGES FOR HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

- 3 The operating environment of northwest Syria has presented some unique access challenges for humanitarian intervention. Idlib and western Aleppo are controlled by opposition armed groups, the most dominant of which is Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, a UN listed terrorist group. The UN and other humanitarian actors' engagement is instead through HTS' civilian branch, the Syrian Salvation government, which has a designated Ministry for Humanitarian Affairs and Development. Strong coordination mechanisms are in place to ensure safe access for humanitarian workers and trainings have been delivered to the local authorities on humanitarian principles. 30 opposition armed groups have signed a commitment to adhere to the principles of humanitarianism.
- 4 In Turkish administered areas, ongoing dialogue and engagement with the Turkish government, both at capital level and importantly at provincial level, is crucial to obtaining consent and access. For HALO, this has been achieved through partnering with a local NGO.

EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE CONTAMINATION: A HIDDEN EMERGENCY

- 5 Explosive ordnance contamination has been confirmed in over 40% of communities surveyed by HALO since 2018. HALO highlighted that just because contamination has not been reported or identified in the other 60% of communities, this does not mean that they are free of contamination, particularly as the conflict is ongoing and new contamination emerges. For this reason, continued survey efforts in northwest Syria are required to understand the exact scale and nature of explosive ordnance contamination and accurately map areas for future clearance.
- 6 Contamination is spread across both urban and rural areas in northwest Syria. In areas where contamination is considered low, the risk to civilian life is still high. This was illustrated by three case studies, all emerging from areas of relatively low level contamination. All three cases involved children picking up, or interacting with unusual items found in their everyday environment which then exploded in their hands, causing multiple deaths and injuries.
- 7 HALO's assessment has revealed that cluster munitions represent 26% of individual items found and are responsible for 40% of accidents recorded.

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VICTIM/SURVIVOR ASSISTANCE

- 8 The prevalence of disability in northwest Syria is 30%, twice the global average. This percentage is expected to rise even more in years to come as a result of high levels of explosive ordnance contamination. This is placing considerable demand on an already strained health service which struggles to meet basic health needs of the population, let alone provide the complex physical and psychological rehabilitation that explosive ordnance accident survivors require. 60% of prosthetic needs in northwest Syria are currently provided by HiHFAD under current victim assistance programming.
- 9 The needs and vulnerabilities of ERW accident survivors are extensive and multi-faceted, going beyond health and physical rehabilitation. ERW accident survivors are also at risk of social stigma, exclusion and discrimination, and long-term economic vulnerability. The majority of survivors are men of working age with families to feed, but whose disability curtails their access to livelihood opportunities. Much data is available on health but more rigorous data is needed on the financial and protection risks for explosive ordnance accident survivors, to enable better planning of this element of victim assistance programming.
- 10 Inclusive programming is essential for the successful delivery of victim assistance: currently 50% of HiHFAD beneficiaries rely on transportation to reach their rehabilitation centres. This provision of transportation is particularly important to ensure that services are available for beneficiaries from the southern areas of Idlib.

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MINE ACTION RESPONSE: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

- 11 It was identified that the future needs in northwest Syria span the full spectrum of mine action activities: the continuation of explosive ordnance disposal, risk education, more extensive and detailed survey and continued victim assistance programming.
- 12 Securing and maintaining cross border access, gaining community consent and ensuring the welfare and safety of teams were identified as the key challenges for mine action interventions in northwest Syria. None of these challenges are unique to mine action.
- 13 Participants raised the challenge of new contamination emerging while the conflict is ongoing. Although there are some communities, normally those close to the front lines, where it is too dangerous for any intervention, it was recognised that there is already access to a large number of communities affected by explosive ordnance where help can be provided to deal with the contamination and its effects without a ceasefire being in place.
- 14 Participants identified the further challenge of the availability of technically competent staff in northwest Syria. This is particularly the case for victim assistance activities where specialist technical roles are required, including physiotherapists and prosthetic technicians. There has been significant investment in upskilling a workforce to meet these needs however there is a risk of losing this technical capacity to other opportunities elsewhere, if needed victim assistance activities are not sustained and current programming is interrupted.
- 15 Many of the general needs of explosive ordnance accident victims/survivors could be met by other humanitarian actors working in the areas of health, protection and livelihood support. Victim assistance needs to be better mainstreamed to encourage other actors to provide this support.
- 16 Working through local implementing partners requires close collaboration and constant communication but it does offer opportunities to broaden programming, encompassing partners' areas of expertise.

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CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

- 17 The threat of explosive ordnance contamination in northwest Syria has not had enough attention or funding to date and despite a clear indication of need there remains a significant funding deficit for mine action going forward.
- 18 The mine action work delivered to date in northwest Syria has been well balanced, addressing both protection and health needs. Future mine action programming in northwest Syria should maintain this balance.
- 19 In order to encourage future funding support, the mine action sector could do more to highlight the inter-linkages between mine action and health and protection sectors and mainstream its work within the broader humanitarian response for northwest Syria.
- 20 Although risk education is a life-saving measure that mitigates the threat to civilians, and survey remains crucial to determine the existence, scale and location of ERW contamination, only through delivery of clearance and disposal, is the threat of death and injury from ERW contamination completely eliminated.
- 21 Beyond financial support, the donors' role can be extended to supporting advocacy efforts through their own channels.

This report is a brief summary of the main points and conclusions of the event. The report reflects an account of the proceedings and does not necessarily reflect any views or policies of the attendees.



If you would like to learn more about tackling the impact of explosive ordnance contamination in northwest Syria, please contact:

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