

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

SUDAN

LANDMINES: A MEMORY OF SUDAN'S CIVIL WAR TOO EASILY FORGOTTEN

Temene was playing with her two young cousins when she found the interesting-looking metal box underneath a pile of rubbish. The 10-year-old took it back to her home in Malakal, on the banks of the White Nile in Southern Sudan, and tried to open it by pulling on a rod, fixed into what appeared to be its lid.

The explosion ripped off most of her right hand, burned her face from chin to forehead and peppered her body with shards of shrapnel. One metal spike hit the head of her four-year-old cousin Emanuel, missing his left eye by 5 millimetres. Another fragment lodged itself in the neck of her other cousin, three-year-old Habiba, stopping just short of his windpipe. The boys' baby sister Angelina, who was also in the room at the time, was burned all the way up her right arm.

Officials are still not sure whether the interesting box was a grenade or an old-fashioned landmine, set off by some sort of fuse. What they are certain of is that it was one of millions of explosive objects that still litter the land around Malakal and other parts of Southern Sudan, all leftovers from decades of fighting in Africa's largest country.

The UN landmine clearing teams are currently fanning out around Malakal and the surrounding Upper Nile region, carefully removing the deadly explosives one by one. But they have a huge task ahead of them. While they are completing their work, aid groups, many of them funded by UNICEF, are pushing a parallel approach. They are travelling to communities and children across Southern Sudan to tell them how they can avoid being injured or killed by the bullets and rockets and shells and mines around their homes. These 'mine-risk education' teams also have a huge task ahead of them. Sudan's most recent north-south civil war ended in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. But three years on there are still fully stocked minefields just 15 minutes drive from Malakal's bustling town centre.

Long-term residents may know all about the explosives, sometimes just yards from their homes. But Malakal – a major transit point for refugees returning home after the war – is bursting with new arrivals who have never been exposed to the dangers. "It is one of the main problems," says Ahmed Masoud, project manager for mine-risk education with aid group Handicap International. "Thousands of new people are now pouring into town after spending decades in refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda," he adds. "They don't have any idea of mines and other explosives. They don't even know what a mine looks like. People are coming in and building houses in mined areas. I have seen people using a minefield as a latrine." Handicap International has four teams of mine-risk educators covering the 12 counties of Upper Nile State. In 2007, they used UNICEF funding to reach more than 28,800 people, many of them youth and religious leaders who were trained to train others in their communities.

Back in Malakal, Temene and her cousins are playing around their huts. Two months after the explosion their wounds may have started to heal, but the memories are still raw. Temene's mother describes how the whole community rushed out of the huts when they heard the explosion and had to hunt for the boys after they ran out of the family compound in a blind panic.

Temene still has to go back to hospital every few weeks to have her bandage changed. She has regained her good humour and greets visitors shyly with an awkward left-handed handshake. She has since had a mine education class – and already knows from experience what to look out for in the ground around her home.

"But there is now a question mark over the funding of future classes for thousands of other new children coming into the region every year. Financial support for mine-risk education has been hard to come by," says Yasmeen Abdallah, UNICEF's project officer for child protection in the region. "Donors like seeing tangible things, building schools and hospitals. What we need to tell them is that these mines are killing people. They are maiming people. They are preventing people from travelling and from carrying out agricultural work."

"And mines are everywhere in Southern Sudan!"