

Opening Remarks by
Assistant Secretary-General Alexandre Zouev
on behalf of the
United Nations Inter-Agency Coordination Group on Mine Action
Meeting of the Mine Action Support Group

24 October 2024

Excellencies, colleagues, friends,

It is an honor to address you on behalf of the Chair of the United Nations Inter-Agency Coordination Group on Mine Action, Under-Secretary-General Jean-Pierre Lacroix, who unfortunately could not be here with you today.

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude for your unwavering commitment to mine action and your partnership with the United Nations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our work is not yet done and it is more relevant than ever.

Explosive ordnance remains a persistent and deadly threat to civilians, humanitarians and peacekeepers. The United Nations estimates that the presence of mines and other explosive ordnance poses a threat to at least 100 million people.

From Gaza to Sudan, Syria, Somalia and beyond, millions remain in constant danger. Clearance efforts are slowed by protracted conflicts, access constraints or a lack of respect for international humanitarian law.

The impact of war is compounded by the adverse effects of climate change, including by making areas contaminated with landmines inaccessible due to extreme weather events.

In **Afghanistan**, where for the first time in a generation there is access to the most affected areas, current political realities and lack of sustained funding preclude large scale clearance that could return land to productive agricultural use.

In **Colombia**, despite mine action's contribution to supporting peace building processes, challenges persist. The intensified use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by non-State armed groups has worsened amid territorial disputes and to protect illegal crops. The suspension of humanitarian demining operations complicates clearance efforts in contaminated areas, particularly in regions inhabited by ethnic and indigenous populations.

In **Gaza and Sudan**, the extensive use of explosive weapons in densely populated urban areas has left piles of rubble mixed with unexploded ordnance that will prevent the safe movement of displaced populations and humanitarians. It could take decades to clear.

In **Ukraine**, where the impact of contamination on agriculture affects countries around the world, and where new contamination takes place every day, yet the Government is determined to return 80% of perceived contaminated land to productive use within ten years.

In **Ethiopia**, since the outbreak of conflict in 2020, contamination has increased, with 1,500 casualties reported - essentially children - in Northern Ethiopia from January 2023 to April 2024. Many IDPs cannot return home due to contamination and insecurity.

IED attacks cause high civilian casualties across **the Sahel**, in **Somalia** and the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**. In 2023 alone, United Nations programmes across 25 countries reported 3,237 casualties from IEDs, with 68% of the victims being civilians.

Moreover, as the sophistication of IEDs increases, there is a shift from victim-operated to radio-controlled and unmanned aerial devices. Technical knowledge as well as movements of terrorist groups have passed relatively unhindered across porous borders and dense forests over the Sahel and coastal countries, further endangering civilians as well as national security forces across the region.

As a result, we are witnessing more remote and lethal attacks, often bypassing traditional detection methods. This makes our work more complicated and urgent than ever.

Ladies and gentlemen,

United Nations mine action programmes are critical in advancing humanitarian, peacebuilding and development efforts.

United Nations mine action strengthens national mine action capacity; ensures a coordinated and prioritized approach, quality assurance and information management; and delivers risk education and victim assistance referral systems. When deployed in a peace operation, the United Nations Mine Action Service also delivers large-scale operations in support of Security Council mandates.

The ability of the United Nations to respond to requests from Member States depends on adequate and sustained funding to ensure continuity of programming. It is becoming increasingly challenging to mobilize these critical funds despite consistent advocacy and efforts to diversify funding sources.

This funding shortfall in the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund for Mine Action, for example, led UNMAS to suspend its Burkina Faso programme and to dramatically downsize its team in Colombia. In the coming six to nine months, programmes in Afghanistan, Colombia, Ethiopia Mali and Syria will likely face closing if funding is not committed soon.

Funding shortages also impacts this Headquarters' capacity to support field programmes and global coordination and advocacy work. In this regard, I extend my sincere appreciation to Denmark, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, New Zealand and Poland for being steadfast in providing unearmarked contributions to cover these core activities in 2024.

Resource mobilization is also an area of innovation with good examples of how mine action has been integrated into budgets and plans of humanitarian, early recovery, food security and development work. The best example of this is the donor response for Ukraine.

Dear Colleagues,

The Mine Action Support Group has played an important role in fostering stronger partnerships in mine action.

Your urgent and continued support is needed to:

- **reduce** the use of indiscriminate weapons,
- **promote** greater compliance with international legal and political instruments,
- **advocate** for and **provide** sufficient funding to respond to Member States' request for humanitarian mine action assistance,
- **develop** sustainable and accountable national mine action capacity, and
- **ensure** effective coordination of mine action actors to protect and assist victims, amongst other vulnerable groups.

Let's keep our momentum strong as we move ahead towards the Fifth Review Conference in Cambodia and collectively meet the challenges ahead.

I wish you all a productive meeting.

Thank you.