



WORLD WITHOUT MINES

NEWSLETTER

Volume 17
No. 1/May 2015

INTERVIEW: KURT PELDA



Photo: Anwar Mohamed

Kurt Pelda was born in 1965 in Basel. He is a freelance journalist and war correspondent for various media including Swiss Television and Der Spiegel.

„Mines are a horrible liability of war.“

War correspondent Kurt Pelda is currently working primarily in Syria and Iraq. In 2014 he won the Human Rights Award from the International Society for Human Rights, and at the same time he was voted Switzerland's Journalist of the Year. Interview: Christian Schmidt

Syria is the only country in the world still deploying landmines. The Assad regime has thus also not signed the Ottawa Treaty banning the use of landmines. It is estimated that

600,000 mines are buried along the borders. What's your view of the situation?

In Syria the large mine field along the border to Turkey is the biggest problem. These mines were laid by the Turkish army, however, years ago when insurgents of the Kurdish underground organisation PKK were attempting to infiltrate the country. Recently I had to cross this field several times.

Today, the mines are a threat mainly for refugees fleeing to safety in Turkey.

Yes. The refugees settle in the mine-free corridors at the border to wait until they can gain entry to Turkey. But, over and over again, it happens that children or livestock wander out of these corridors, and terrible accidents occur.

IS extremists also deploy mines. At the end of 2014, four members of a demining team were killed in a blast outside Mosul in Iraq. The door handle to a bathroom was booby-trapped to trigger the mine.

Such improvised explosive devices will be a major problem. IS forces are now with-

drawing practically everywhere. They overextended themselves and occupied too much land which they are now unable to keep. But they are not only withdrawing, they are leaving behind mines in the cities and villages they occupied.

How do you yourself deal with the danger?

I am extremely careful and always have a guide with me. That is particularly important when I am travelling through farming areas where mines have been deployed. I myself do not recognise the differences between land where mines have been laid and land that is mine-free, but the guide does. And when we have to pass through a minefield, then I make sure to follow exactly in his footsteps!

Have you ever been in immediate danger yourself?

Yes, in Angola, during the civil war. The rebels had attacked a high-voltage power line, and the army laid mines to protect the pylons. Sometimes the mines were very simple devices: hand grenades wired together and fixed on posts. We were travelling at night, and a man in front of me tripped a wire and triggered the detonator. The explosion was delayed, however, so we had time to run away. Experiences like that are not easily forgotten.

Mines represent a danger mainly for civilians.

Yes. That's true. In Libya, for example, mines laid by the Italians in World War II are still active. And in the Sahara, Gaddafi's forces mined the water wells. That is not only a hazard for the population, it also limits their movements in everyday life and their ability to earn a living – for decades after the conflict! Mines are a horrible liability of war.

On various occasions you have criticised the media, stating that they have a responsibility in the matter.

The media is present where the action is; they want to cover the fighting. What happens to the civilian population in war is largely overlooked, like the massacre carried out by the Assad regime, and also the problem of landmines. That is a mistake.



Photo: Anwar Mohamed

Kurt Pelda on a tank captured by rebels near Aleppo, Syria.



Photo: Laif

Kobane – littered with landmines.

After months of intensive fighting, the Kurdish Syrian forces drove Islamic State (IS) militants from the city of Kobane in January. Around ten thousand refugees have since returned to the city, which is located on the border between Syria and Turkey, and another 200,000 are still waiting to come back. Kobane has been largely destroyed, however, and, in addition, IS extremists have planted mines in large areas of the city in order to make resettlement impossible. Children's toys, flash lights, pillows, a door ajar – whatever a person touches can turn out to be a deadly trap. Children searching for playthings in the desolate city ruins are particularly at risk.



Photo: Afrilam

Danny knew that grenades were buried in the garden behind his house, and he acted in an exemplary way.

The grenades in the garden of Danny Bofia.

The turmoil in the Democratic Republic of Congo seems never-ending. Although the war is officially over, fighting is still going on in the east of the country. And explosive war ordnance is often left behind.

In the Congo, landmines are a threat to the civilian population, but an even greater threat are the unexploded devices left behind, in particular a variety of different kinds of grenade which can have a similar effect to that of landmines. Every year these remnants of war claim around 50 victims – most of them are children.

In 2005, Augustin Bofia, lieutenant with the Congolese police, buried a load of grenades in his own garden. Bofia was responsible for weapons and munitions in the north Congolese city of Buta and was ordered by his superior to find a safe place to store explosives. As a suitable depot did not exist, he took the bags of munitions home with him and buried them there. Bofia's son, six-year-old Danny, watched as his father dug the trench and covered the munitions with earth.

Nine years later, our partner organisation, Afrilam, conducted a programme in the city of Buta intended to teach children about the hazards of landmines and other warfare material. Danny Bofia spoke up about the explosives his father had hidden long ago behind his house.

Afrilam staff contacted Danny's father, and he showed them the garden and explained that in 2006 two of his military colleagues had dug up several grenades with the intention of using the gunpowder they contain for fishing purposes. One of the weapons exploded, however, killing one of the men and maiming the other.

During that visit in June 2014, Afrilam marked the hazardous zones in Augustin Bofia's garden. When the organisation became accredited for explosive ordnance disposal in early 2015 – the only such organisation in the region – the remaining munitions were finally destroyed.



Photo: Afrilam

To salvage the buried grenades, the earth covering them first had to be carefully removed.



Photo: Afrilam

After the grenades were recovered, they were disposed of by controlled detonation.



Foto: DanChurchAid

Life-saving information: School children learn what to do when they encounter landmines and other explosive remnants of war.

World Without Mines supports new education project in South Sudan.

The armed conflict in South Sudan continues to smoulder and has claimed thousands of victims so far. Over 1.4 million people have fled. Displaced families seek refuge in isolated areas in the north of the country, where they feel the safest. The situation is precarious, and they are in desperate need of humanitarian aid. Many are not familiar with the area and are not aware of the landmine hazards.

World Without Mines is therefore supporting a team from DanChurchAid that travels together with other aid organisations into these remote areas to teach the people there about the dangers. They learn how to recognise explosive devices and protect themselves and others. Local people are selected

and trained to pass on this knowledge to new arrivals and children, so the learning can continue after the project is concluded.

The team from DanChurchAid also steps in when, like in the city of Rumbek, a school building once occupied by the military is prepared to resume its original function as a school. Since the military may have left behind explosive devices, more than a thousand school children and their teachers have been taught about the dangers of landmines.

IMPRESSUM

Circulation: 19,500, appears 2 x year
Text: Gabriela Fuchs, Sandra Montagne, Christian Schmidt
Concept: Oliver Gemperle GmbH, Zurich
Printers: Druckerei Albisrieden, Zurich
Paper: Cyclus Print, 100 % Recycling paper

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