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STARS AND STRIPES.

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Experts doubt land mines' deterrent value

By [Jeremy Kirk](#), Stars and Stripes

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SEOUL — On Imjin River's banks, Chong So-yi was looking for marsh snails on a sunny spring day last June when an unlucky step took her left leg.

The 35-year-old woman stepped on a U.S. M14 anti-personnel mine, one of 1 million such devices the South Korean Defense Ministry has estimated are buried in and near the Demilitarized Zone.

"I don't blame anyone," said Chong, who wears a prosthesis and sees a mental health counselor every week. "I lost my one leg already, so nothing can get my leg back."

Mines were sown in woody areas in the 1960s, to discourage a North Korean invasion. The devices are old now, but active mines — buffeted by summer monsoon rains — occasionally plop into farmers' rice paddies and civilian-populated areas, according to the Korea Campaign to Ban Landmines.

Chong's accident occurred in Yongchon-gun northwest of Seoul, an area still holding many active old mines, said Lee Shi-woo, a KCBL research associate. Military officials don't have records for some mined areas, Lee said.

"It is extremely dangerous because nobody knows," he said.

Residents near the DMZ said U.S. soldiers were observed laying mines in the 1960s, said U.S. Forces Korea spokeswoman Lee Ferguson. Currently, she said, no mines are used by U.S. forces.

Last year, a mine in a rice field injured six Koreans.

In 2001, a U.S. soldier at Camp Bonifas suffered a leg injury when he strayed

into a minefield during morning exercise.

KCBL estimates mines have killed 1,000 civilians and up to 3,000 soldiers since the Korean War ended in 1953.

Despite campaigns to eliminate mine use, the United States and South Korea have millions on reserve in case of a second Korean War, according to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

“There are some on the peninsula in the war reserve stock,” Ferguson said.

The mines are a deadly legacy of the conflict between the Koreas and a continuing sore point for anti-land mine groups. The military argued in a 1997 briefing that mines are needed to halt a North Korean drive to Seoul, just 35 miles from the divided border.

That’s among reasons the United States gave for refusing to sign the 1997 Ottawa Treaty, which seeks to ban using and stockpiling anti-personnel mines, defense officials have said. The Clinton administration pledged to join the treaty by 2006.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., has worked for several years with the Defense Department on alternatives to land mines “with the goal of them not being used or necessary in Korea,” said Leahy spokesman David Carle.

Former U.S. military officials and activist groups say the reserve mines are impractical even on the Korean battlefield. They argue that mines impede the forward movement of friendly forces.

The Bush administration has studied land mine concerns since June 2001 but has issued no policy changes. The Pentagon recommended in November 2001 abandoning any commitment to join the Ottawa Treaty, according to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

The Bush review involves agencies including the Pentagon, the National Security Council and the State Department.

“We are very concerned that the Bush administration would undo that progress,” said Gina Coplon-Newfield, coordinator for the U.S. Campaign to Ban Landmines.

But U.S. military officers also have publicly opposed mines. Six Army generals and one admiral wrote Bush in May 2001, slamming support for mines in South Korea.

Anti-personnel mines are “not in any way critical or decisive in maintaining the peninsula’s security,” they wrote.

Retired Lt. Gen. James F. Hollingsworth, who commanded I Corps in South Korea from 1973 to 1976, said land mines “kill a lot of your own people.” Further, it hurts offensive moves, he said.

“If you are in a mechanized armor outfit, that will cause a significant problem to maneuver,” said Hollingsworth, who was injured by a mine during World War II and was among those signing the letter. “I don’t want anything to interfere with the capability to move my forces in combat.”

More than half of the mines earmarked for South Korea aren’t even in South Korea, according to Human Rights Watch, an independent activist group.

The Army’s Materiel Command said 45 percent of the 1.2 million anti-personnel mines for South Korea are stored in the United States.

About 50 percent are stored in South Korea and would be turned over to South Korean soldiers during war, while U.S. forces, according to HRW, would use 5 percent. Not determined: whether a transfer would violate a 1992 law prohibiting the export or transfer of anti-personnel mines to any country.

The M14 and M16 mines do not self-destruct and can have long underground lives.

They are impractical for battle because they have to be placed in the ground by hand, said Marissa A. Vitagliano, senior research associate for the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation in Washington, D.C.

“It would take so many trucks and so many people to transport those to the front lines,” Vitagliano said.

In South Korea, VVAF has said, the U.S. military has vehicles and aircraft capable of quickly scattering other kinds of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines.

Reports have indicated even existing mines in the DMZ — of which there may be 1 million — would slow a North Korean invasion by only 25 minutes, Coplton-Newfield said.

— *Choe Song-won contributed to this report.*

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