



Long after wars are waged, some weapons remain a constant threat to civilians in the peacetime that follows. Landmines are indiscriminate weapons that wait underground for years, sometimes decades, maiming and killing children, ordinary civilians or, for instance, farmers as well as their cattle, who happen to step on them.

The battle against mines has in the last few years acquired an unlikely, but effective little helper: the rat.

A Belgian NGO, APOPO, and its founder Bart Weetjens, discovered that rats' extraordinary sense of smell can be used to detect landmines. The African Giant Pouched Rat is relatively easy to train, native and widely available in Sub-Saharan Africa. Most importantly, they are light enough to not set off a land mine. The rats are trained to scratch on the surface where they have found a landmine and get a well deserved prize.

A human deminer then digs the mine up. The first mine detecting rats got their official

accreditation in 2004 and two years later the rats were fully involved in Mozambique's minefields.

A rat can clear an area of 200m² in an hour, while a human deminer would need 2 weeks to do the same job. Now, the rats have covered an area larger than 6 million square meters and helped digging up around 2,500 landmines. New rats are trained in Tanzania and mine detecting rats have worked also in Angola, Cambodia and Thailand.

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Landmines can be found almost everywhere. As of October 2012, some 59 states and six other areas were confirmed to be affected by landmines. Today, new frontiers for action have emerged, most notably in Syria and Mali.

In his message for the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said he, however, was encouraged by the fact that 161 Member States have agreed to be bound by the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention of 1997. More than 41 million stockpiled anti-personnel mines have been destroyed, and their production, sale and transfer have in essence stopped.

But despite efforts from both rats and humans, UNODA reports that well over 10 million stockpiled mines are yet to be destroyed. Every day, people die or lose limbs from stepping on a landmine, mostly in countries at peace - and the majority of victims are civilians. In addition to posing a significant threat to life and safety of both humans and wildlife, infested land hampers productivity and impedes social and economic development.