

“Macky Sall has forgotten us,” say Senegal’s landmine victims

Sunday 5 May 2019, by [FASANO Stefano](#) (Date first published: 9 April 2019).

On 24 February Macky Sall won a resounding victory in the Senegalese presidential elections. He was re-elected for a second term in office with 58 per cent of the vote thanks to an electoral campaign that shone a spotlight on the massive infrastructure projects completed during his first term : the 212 kilometres of highway built ; the new arena for traditional Senegalese wrestling ; the new Blaise Diagne International Airport and the railway line connecting it to the capital city of Dakar.

The leitmotif of the election, oft-repeated in local assemblies, was to “let the president finish his project [of developing Senegal]” by giving him a second term. It is a message that clearly struck a chord with the Senegalese electorate, many of whom associate these major infrastructure projects with the developed Western countries they [see their sons emigrating to](#).

Even still, President Sall’s electoral success was not universal. In the southern region of Casamance, where a low-level separatist conflict has been taking place since 1982, support for the incumbent is at an all-time low. The President was outclassed by his main opponent in the region, Ousmane Sonko, who got more than 50 per cent of vote by campaigning on his ability to bring about change as ‘the new kid on the block’.

Geographically separated from northern Senegal by The Gambia, the ethnic, religious and cultural differences that mark out Casamance from the rest of Senegal are heightened by a feeling of political and economic disenfranchisement.

Thirty-five years of low-level conflict – that resulted from these grievances and was eventually interrupted by a fragile ceasefire in 2014 – has left an unknown number of landmines in the ground, against which Sall promised an intense campaign of mapping and mine-clearance in a bid to reach the ambitious goal of a mine-free Senegal by 2021. However, after minesweeping operations ground to a halt in July 2017 when donor funding dried up, this goal is now further away than ever.

Meanwhile, landmines continue to kill : the last civilian victim was a 13-year-old boy, who died in September 2018 while playing in a field next to his school in the village of Sindian in northern Casamance. It is a very distant reality from the image presented on the ubiquitous billboards 450 km away in Dakar, where Casamance is portrayed as a safe, tax-free, lush, green paradise that is waiting to welcome tourists and foreign investors with open arms.

“The story is always the same”

“I never took that path again, not since the soldiers brought his body back in a coffin for the funeral,” recounts Abdou Touré as he stares into space while recalling the death of his nephew, Cheick. The 25-year-old died in 2013 after a landmine exploded as he drove his moto-taxi along a pathway near Sindian village. “They did not allow me to see him,” continues Fatou Badji, Cheick’s mother. A clear undercurrent of anger colours her voice : the explosion had rendered her son’s body

unrecognisable.

The Touré family is just one of many in the area whose lives have been irrevocably changed by the ordinary but destructive presence of landmines. Famara Badji tells a similar story about the death of her son Ibrahima in 2014. "He was driving his taxi on the way to the Gambian border." Her husky and jovial laugh suddenly disappears as she recalls the details : "The explosion flipped the car and he died there," she says, staring at the faded photograph of her son that she holds in her hands.

"The only thing that changes is the name of the victim," says Yankhoba Sagna, the mayor of Sindian. "But the story is always the same." He continues : "After an accident happens, the only thing you can expect from the state is your body to be brought back to your family. And not every time."

In September 2018, after the umpteenth death of a child in their village because of a landmine, Sagna stood up against Sall's government and accused the cabinet of failing to tackle the problem.

Sindian, just north of Casamance, is not only one of the most areas most 'polluted' by landmines, it is also subject to a heavy military presence. Checkpoints patrolled by brusque soldiers with armoured cars and heavy machine guns are a common sight. Part of this area, and most of all the nearby forest on the border with The Gambia, is still under the control of MFDC, the Casamance separatist movement. It is an organisation that is accused of having used deadly devices to defend their positions against the Senegalese army in the past.

"No mapping or mine clearance operation has never been put into action in this area," confirms Sagna. As he sees it, clearing the mines once and for all is not a priority for the state. "The government's priority seems to be the military and repressing the fighters." Noticeably, he uses the more neutral term 'fighters' instead of 'rebels', "because being mayor here is like being between hammer and anvil".

No funding, no clearances, no solutions

Corruption, according to Sagna, is probably the main reason why security-related funds for the Casamance region are allocated to state-controlled operators, such as the army. However, locals say that the army tends to use this funding to enhance its control over the territory and take repressive actions against the MFDC.

In regard to the question of where the landmines originate from, Sagna notes that the army maintains numerous camps in the area without having enough soldiers to fully man them : "It is unthinkable posting a soldier every 100 metres around the perimeter of each one of these camps, most of all by night," Mayor Sagna explains. "I wonder how the army secures these perimeters, especially around the small camps, with little personnel inside... ?" he speculates.

If proven, the use of explosive anti-personnel devices by the army would be a serious infringement of the Ottawa Treaty - signed by Senegal in 1997 - which prohibits the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel mines. The reaction of the local military command to the most recent landmine death last September, according to the mayor and confirmed by many villagers, was a door-to-door 'sensitisation' campaign to educate young children to not get too close to military boundaries in the forest.

Humanité & Inclusion is an international NGO that carried out mine-clearance campaigns in the Casamance region between 2007 and 2017. "[We stopped] not because we finished our job," says Faly Keita, regional coordinator for the organisation. The NGO stopped its mine-clearance work when the funding did. "We don't question which side

placed the landmines. We just intervene once we get the green light from the state," he explains.

More than 1,200,000 m² of land still needs to be surveyed and cleared, and there are zones that have been completely uninspected, like Sindian. "These areas are impossible to reach for us. When we tried, in 2013 for example, our operators were kidnapped." The population, according to Keita, does not accept the presence of the minesweepers, because for the rebels living in these 'pockets of resistance' removing the landmines would mean giving up the little control they have over the territory. The only alternative is for the fighters to surrender to the army, but the government doesn't seem to be offering any olive branches.

"I know tens of young men, fighters, who want to change their lives," says Mayor Sagna. "A serious policy of reintegration for these people would be ideal. But right now, repression seems to be the priority. With questionable results, I'd say."

Contradictory claims

Colonel Khar Diouf, commander of the army's regional headquarters, did not reply to *Equal Times*'s request for an interview. However, Colonel Abdou Thiam, director of the PR office of the army High Command in Dakar, agreed to explain the role of the army in the use of landmines in Casamance. "The army does not put in place any humanitarian minesweeping operations," he says. "We do not carry out extensive search-and-clear campaigns. If during our operations we find a minefield, we clear a passage through, and immediately report the device's presence to the competent civilian authorities."

This claim was contradicted by two non-commissioned officers stationed under the command of Colonel Diouf, who asked to remain anonymous. They told *Equal Times* that in 'hot' areas, the general attitude is to clear the way without reporting the minefield's presence to the 'competent authorities'. "Of course, it is useful to know [the rebels] are there. In this way, we know where to find them," one of the soldiers says. But when *Equal Times* suggested that civilians in the area also need to know when there are minefields present, the second soldier replied : "Well, they help them anyway, the rebels. People there are on their side."

The 'competent civilian authorities' are represented by the Centre National d'Action Antimines au Sénégal (National Centre for Anti-Mine Action, or CNAMS), an agency under the Senegalese Foreign Office control. CNAMS is formally in charge of coordinating mine-clearance campaigns, as well as victim support activities. However, almost any action is subject to the provision of foreign funds, which are usually obtained through the advocacy work of foreign NGOs working in the field in Casamance. "We requested 700 million Francs CFA in 2017 (approximately US\$1.2 million) from the state for our operations, and 500 million (approximately US\$857,000) in 2018. In Dakar they replied there were no funds available," explains retired Colonel Barham Thiam, director of CNAMS.

Since the last tranche of USAID funding ended, and in the absence of any other source of external funding, mine-clearance and victim support operations have stalled since July 2017. The Senegalese state has not spend a single franc on mine-clearance related activities apart from the 300 million CFA (approximately US\$514,000) allocated every year by the National Assembly for the administrative functions of the CNAMS.

However, observers note that this is a disproportionately high amount of money for one office in Ziguinchor (the biggest city in Casamance), a couple of vehicles and less than 10 administrative employees.

In April 2019, a new campaign of mine-clearance should start. "We have received US\$450,000 of funding, for 10 months, from USAID," explains Colonel Thiam.

Theoretically, the work of CNAMS should also provide medical and financial assistance for landmine victims. But this is easier said than done – and, of course, dependent on foreign funds.

"In Dakar, the President has forgotten us," says Ibrahima Sacko, a 35-year-old carpenter living in the Ziguinchor suburbs. He lost his left leg 16 years ago after stepping on a landmine. His carpentry business, as with his prosthetic, was completely paid for by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). He takes lots of breaks while speaking, reflecting on his difficulties : "After the accident, you are half of what you were before," he reflects. "The priority of this country must be mine-clearance. I don't care who placed those mines there. They have forgotten us," he repeats, returning once more to his thoughts.

The same view is taken by Stephanie Malack, who manages a small tailoring business in Ziguinchor, and has survived for 20 years without her left leg. The ICRC also helped her to set up shop and obtain a prosthetic, but it has been causing her problems for some time now ; she is no longer able to wear the prosthetic comfortably, and yet she does not have the money to buy a new one. "The government has not done anything for us. Macky Sall has forgotten us," she explains furiously, waving her crutch in the air. "The conflict had to be addressed at a national level against the government. Not against the people living here," she says. "The consequences of the conflict are only experienced by locals. We see them [the government] only around election time. They don't give a damn about Casamance. They don't give a damn about us."

Cet article a été traduit de l'anglais.

Stefano Fasano

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Equal Times

<https://www.equaltimes.org/macky-sall-has-forgotten-us-say>