Finally, Safe Demining

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Gasimov taught mine-risk education to schoolchildren in affected areas of Azerbaijan. “I used to go to schools conducting mine-risk education in order to prevent incidents such as my own,” he remembers.

Gasimov’s commitment to his work in mine action helped him receive the promotion to Team Leader of the Training and Quality Assurance Team at ANAMA, an important component of the mine-action program in Azerbaijan. The T&QA Team at ANAMA was created specifically to oversee the clearance operations of the demining companies and to identify and address any problems that arise during the demining process.

At part of his training for the T&QA Team at ANAMA, Gasimov attended a number of courses in mine action. He provides the following development of the main functions of his team: “We conduct trainings, work on capacity building, conduct monitoring inspections at 2 years QA, and also ensure that the land clearance by the demining agencies has been done in accordance with the National and Institutional Mine Action Standards.” He adds, “We make sure that nothing remains and there was no ordinance missed.”

Gasimov recognizes mine clearance is an ongoing process. “All of my achievements in this filed have been in an ongoing process. We work and we learn. Sometimes, we learn by making mistakes, but our first goal is to make the land free from mines using the improved standards.” Gasimov is happy to dedicate his life’s work to the decontamination of devices that are so harmful. “Each defeated mine and each neutralized piece of ordinance means someone’s rescued life or protected health.”

In spite of the difficulties that accompany working in minefields, Gasimov feels his work as mine scare has been rewarding. He hopes one day all countries, including his own, will be free from the complications inflicted by mines and UXO. The young T&QA Team Leader would also like to see the injury and death caused by mines and UXO decrease from the world. “Some of our people will try and reach those that are being used by landmines,” Gasimov laments. “It is very hard.”

When asked about his suggestions for the mine-action community, Gasimov believes communication is essential to solving the mine problem. “My suggestion is to work closely, to share experiences with other countries and as work as one force against the problem. We can share knowledge that we have learned so that others do not have to learn from their own mistakes.”

It is Gasimov’s sense of hope, compassion and unity that makes him a valuable member of the demining community. He not only contributes, he knowledge and dedication to the field, but he also has taught mine victims that recovery from tragic situations is well within reach.

See Endnotes, page 111.

Souza and Sá: Finally, Safe Demining

Following a series of mistakes that caused hundreds of accidents—many fatal—a new battalion of the National Police of Peru now ensures mine clearance quality for 1,711 power transmission towers.

In addition to having mined sports along as border with Ecuador resulting from a conflict resolved long ago. These extremely fortuitous, primarily on civilian landmines in accidents in the areas surrounding the towers of the power-transmission lines that cross the country. In the mid-1980s, guerrillas of the Sendero Luminoso group launched a strategy to knock down towers with high-tension lines to cause blackouts in several regions, including the capital, Lima. In 1880, in one day—the day before elections—10 towers were knocked down, resulting in a nationwide blackout.

After that incident, authorities decided it was urgent to improve their power-transmission infrastructure. However, it was not feasible to keep guards around every tower, many of which were located deep in the jungle, in inobitable areas or at high altitudes. The solution was to employ landmines quickly around these towers, but as with every plan created in haste, many mistakes with fatal consequences resulted.

Charged with the task of eradicating the landmines, the National Police developed an “explosive device for self-protection,” which was basically an adapted army mine, equipped with a system of precise location and assembled at the very site where it was planted. Essentially the device was nothing more than an improvised landmine. Later, the country’s Navy would develop a mine of its own. It was smaller and more powerful, but a little safer in its functioning.

In 1989, a group of 60 policy officers was assigned to plant 30 to 50 landmines around each of the 1,711 towers located at strategic spots in the departments of Lima, Junín, Huancavelica and La Libertad. Of those 60 professionals, only 23 had had some kind of training and qualification in explosives, and they transferred their knowledge to the others. Worse still, each time one of the towers needed technical maintenance, those professionals were sent aboard to “open a path” to the tower, dismantling and removing the landmines from a strip of land where they would be replaced and reactivated later. They had no personal protective equipment and no plan for transportation and rescue if required. There were no reliable maps of mine locations either, since many of them had to be planted quickly in areas with elevations of over 3,000 meters (10,000 feet) due to the physiological threats posed by high altitudes, or were induced to possible displacements caused by rain, floods, landslides, vegetation growth, etc.

The lack of proper training and qualifications, personal safety equipment and accurate maps, add to the quality of landmines themselves and the
mistaken strategy of removal and reinforcement of the landmines, caused dozens of accidents. Eighty-one of the professionals who had worked in the Division of Safety in Landmine Activation—Explosive Devices for Self-protection Unit were involved in explosions. Many of them were hospitalized and five died as a result of their wounds. Of the accidenters, 41 were injured badly to return to work, and 35 are still working with mild injuries. Eight explosives for de-mining were involved in an accident, according to the internationally accepted standards. Within the National Police, the Division of Seguridad Criminal (DIVSECOM), with approximately 80 members, receives support for training and learning new techniques.1

From 1989 to 2003, over 300 landmine incidents were recorded in Peru, 175 of them in the areas surrounding power-transmission towers.

There were cases like the one of Fredy Mendiola, who, at the age of five, was playing with his thump near a high-tension tower in the department of Junin and saw a dirty object he believed to be a radio on the ground. His childhood curiosity and naivety lead him to take the artifact in his hands and pinch the button, causing it to explode. He found himself unconscious and thought he was dead. The boy would only move again almost 16 hours later, when a good-natured taxi driver took him to a hospital. Mendiola lost three fingers on his right hand, two from his left, and became permanently blind from the explosion. He is still gazing into the artifact in his hands and pressing the button, causing it to explode. Demining quality assurance for all towers should have been completed by June 2006, but, due to bureaucratic problems, the deadline for the agreement between Peru and OAS was postponed. Consequently, Noe Ñahuero Cordova, a little boy who lived in Lima, died in a field from an object he did not recognize. He was not in the proper gear, and he was not aware of the dangers of UXOs.

This kind of incident is common and the clearers gather better quality assurance and training. Since the accident, the system of watches adds 1,711 towers from June 2002 to February 2004. During this period, over 60,000 landmines were removed from areas surrounding the towers. The task of clearing the more than 82,000 square kilometers (32,160 square miles) of land has been carried out. In 2006, over 7,200 hectares (28 square miles) were cleared, benefiting more than 600,000 people. In 2003, the National Police started the program “Clean hands, better quality assurance was needed. Since restarting quality assurance activities in March 2006, 523 towers have been released. Nine landmines and approximately 1,700 pieces of unexploded ordnance (UXO) were found. Plans are under consideration to continue the work of the clearers. The work of such teams is not enough to remind and educate people of the dangers of UXOs. A team is only able to visit five to six villages each month and every village once every three years. The number of accidents from UXOs continues to be high in Peru. The clearing task of the more than 300,000 hectares (110,100 square miles) is mostly concentrated in the central part of the country.

The National Police reported that 1,461 previously demined power towers in Huancavelica, Ica and Lima were now considered dangerous. As a signatory of the Ottawa Convention, Peru today carries out the necessary international assistance and support to have returned, re-equipped and better-trained members of the Brazilian Demining Institute (IDB). Within the National Police, the Division of Demining—Explosive Devices for Self-protection (DIVSECOM), with approximately 80 members, receives support for training and learning new techniques. Since the demining program was begun, over 17,000 towers have been cleared, benefitting over 500,000 people. The task of clearing the more than 82,000 square kilometers (32,160 square miles) of land has been carried out. In 2006, over 7,200 hectares (28 square miles) were cleared, benefiting more than 600,000 people.

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