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Minde Victim Assistance: Strengthening the Health Sector in Azerbaijan

In July 1998, following consultation with its UN partners, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), acting in its capacity as a focal point for all mine-related activities within the UN system, offered to field a multidisciplinary inter-agency mission to assess the requirement for further UN assistance in Azerbaijan. The mission found a serious dearth of recorded data concerning mine/UXO casualties. Even agencies dealing directly with mine victims, such as hospitals and prosthetic centers, have no mechanism to disaggregate data on mine/UXO victims from other war-related injuries.

by Rauf Mamedov & Aziz Aliyev, ANAMA

Background

Humanitarian mine action in Azerbaijan has been institutionalized since July 1998, when the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) was established by Presidential Decree. In April 1999, the government of Azerbaijan and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) signed a joint project, the Azerbaijan Mine Action Program (AMAP), as a result of the recommendations of the assessment mission authorized by UNMAS. These recommendations have also been considered in the development of the National Strategic Plan for mine action, which envisaged, along with management, clearance, survey and mine risk education (MRE), the implementation of the mine victim assistance (MVA) program based on a needs assessment of the mine victims database populated with 1,112 data. Accordingly, MVA is important in strengthening the health sector in Azerbaijan. The Strategic Plan also envisioned the development and implementation of a long-term MVA plan for Azerbaijan, with the assistance of the World Health Organization (WHO). The implementation of the national plan and structure and that is based on a needs assessment in order to cover all aspects of mine victim support.

Further Consideration

Another assessment of possible approaches to solve the mine/UXO contamination problem was conducted in early 2001 by Mr. Tiharu Dastoor, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Landmine Coordinator for the Northern Caucasus. The assessment discovered the necessity of addressing the potential needs of mine victims in Azerbaijan. An integrated and comprehensive assistance program cannot be set up for the mine victims of Azerbaijan until a needs assessment is carried out. This assessment must address more than prosthetic needs. It must address the social and economic needs of not only the limbless but also of the hearing, sight and mentally impaired.

The assessment also revealed that inadequate psychological trauma counseling and vocational training services were being provided for war victims. In both areas (provided an agreement is reached through the Working Group on Victim Assistance and donor funding), intervention would be extremely cost-efficient with high-impact results. It is important to include psychological trauma counseling in any mine action program. The assessment recommended developing a capacity-building program to address the need for a non-dis ease-oriented approach to psychological intervention. It was also concluded that vocational training should be included as part of the comprehensive approach to dealing with mine victims. Vocational training should be completed by conducting a baseline survey for gathering relevant information, and then by conducting a series of training workshops with relevant health personnel/social workers. Prosthetic/orthopedic centers, active in Baku should also be encouraged to gather data on mine/UXO victims, which can be entered into a uniform database.

Implementation of MVA

ANAMA started MVA-related activities in April 2002. The strategy is mainly aimed at joining efforts of national and international organizations in assisting disabled people, as well as in developing and implementing the long-term MVA plan in Azerbaijan. ANAMA decided to undertake a needs assessment of the situation of mine/UXO survivors, to help identify current needs and to suggest a recovery strategy to address these needs. The organization has worked with the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations, possesses a large database of the local roles and customs, could include job placement searches if needed, has sound managerial practices and was recommended by others. Therefore, it was decided to conduct in 2001 and 11 war-affected districts, registered about 2,000 landmine/UXO victims. It is believed that the number of mine victims is much higher; as most of the victims are living in other parts of Azerbaijan not yet surveyed. A total of 52 recent mine victims were reported in 2001 and 2002. Detailed information on victims is maintained in IMASA. The existing IMASA questionnaire, together with data gathered on casualties, makes it possible to gather information about mine incidents (circumstances and location, type of explosive devices, type of injury etc.), which is verified by survivors. Despite this methodology, there is a lack of information regarding the needs of survivors in the questionnaire.

In the beginning stages of activities, an inter-agency survey was conducted in about 90 national organizations to identify those conducting MVA or involved in implementation of disabled care projects. Related ministries have been visited and, in consultation with Ministry of Social Affairs (MVA-unaffiliated) and ANAMA, a list of databases for individuals that are affected by landmines has been prepared. To analyze data, information, and surveys completed to determine the needs of mine victims.

• Develop a plan.

The project will be implemented by ANAMA through a partner organization to be identified in a bidding procedure. The UNDP Country Office will provide the Quality Assurance Monitor. ANAMA MVA officer will serve as project coordinator. A new questionnaire form will be developed. In addition to the previous IMASA form, it will give comprehensive information about the needs of survivors in medical and psychological counseling, economic rehabilitation, economic assistance and advocacy, as well as in education, training and social care. The project coordinator will train and sensitize survey implementers to issues of trauma and recovery experienced by mine-victims and their families before the implementers interview landmine survivors.

ANAMA will gather preliminary information for the needs of the survey, provide technical training for the staff of the contractor and perform survey data collection, processing (in IMASA) and analysis (in the Agency’s Information Department). ANAMA will also monitor and evaluate survey activities and prepare a Mine Victim Needs Assessment Report. The report will be reviewed by an independent agency MVA Working Group and submitted to the GOA. Based on the needs assessment conducted, the long-term MVA strategy will be developed and the project proposals on various aspects of MVA will be drafted and presented to donors.

Consolidated Activity Within Working Group

The Working Group on Mine/UXO Victim Assistance was established and consists of representatives of relevant ministries, governmental agencies, and national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The aim of the Working Group on Mine/UXO Victim Assistance is to coordinate activities providing support to disabled people in Azerbaijan and to extend this support to mine/UXO survivors. The following objectives for the Working Group have been identified:

• Develop and strengthen collaboration between ministries and organizations dealing with assistance to disabled people.
• Conduct national surveys to identify assistance needs of mine/UXO survivors
with the aim of creating a united and reliable database on mine victims in Azerbaijan.

- Identify and maintain an MVA strategy based on needs and develop a long-term national program.
- Catalyze and coordinate development and implementation of MVA projects and programs.
- Establish and run a special public fund to raise money for financing MVA projects and programs.
- Initiate an information network for disabled people in Azerbaijan, including individuals and associations.
- Identify possible vocational areas for disabled people in different districts in order to create occupational (professional) rehabilitation centers for mine victims and to coordinate their activities.
- Spread information on MVA activities to the public and attract donors.

The last meeting of the Working Group was held in ANAMA's office on May 7, 2003. Participants were informed that the project proposal "Azerbaijan Countryside Mine Victim Survey" had been finalized and presented to donors. The representatives of WHO and Association Development of Invalids of Azerbaijan Republic (ADIAR) proposed some amendments to the survey questionnaire.

Mr. Lutfali Kahir, the UNDP CTA for ANAMA, emphasized that project proposals, based on wide and detailed information and on an integrated database, might ensure more efficient results. He mentioned the high professional level of the ANAMA Information Department and recommended use of its capabilities for the purposes of the Working Group. ANAMA has been chosen as a focal point for distributing printed materials and information dedicated to assisting disabled people in Azerbaijan. All information will be forwarded to members of the Working Group through the Agency. The ANAMA website (www.anama.baku.az) is considered an effective means of information exchange. Along with the electronic means of information exchange, it also proposed distributing a bi-monthly bulletin on the Working Group. The study of international experience is also considered important. Therefore, ANAMA has started making contact with organizations listed in the Global Mine Action Registry on James Madison University’s Mine Action Information Center (MAIC) website (http://maic.jmu.edu/gmaz).

The Democratic Journalists’ League, which presented at the meeting for the first time, proposed establishing a “hotline” for preliminary mine victim data collection. ADIAR announced that its Information and Consultancy Center, operational for years, could also be used for this purpose. The use of this “hotline,” along with official sources of information, could serve in developing contacts or networking mine survivors. It was also mentioned that regular publication of articles on mine action, MRE and MVA will canalize the public opinion and the capabilities of society in resolving the problems in these areas.

The initiative group, consisting of ADIAR, Dirdesh (Revival), the Democratic Journalists’ League, WHO and ANAMA, was established for detailed study of particular problems.

The participants decided to continue discussions on establishing and maintaining special public funds on victim assistance, after detailed study of relevant regulations and development of the charter. Everybody agreed that the participation of outstanding people and leading businessmen of Azerbaijan could ensure community respect for the fund. It was decided to compile the Group Work Plan taking into account organizations’ propositions and capacities in preferable activity areas.

The Azerbaijani Campaign to Ban Landmines (ACBL) informed the meeting of its project on mine victim data collection in over 10 districts of Azerbaijan, approved by the Slovenian-based International Trust Fund for Demining and MVA. The implementation of the project will start soon. The activity of the NGO “Shkodry Eli” (Healing Hands) from Shki district, involving MVA, created deep interest among participants. The organization is assisting mine survivors from Fizuli and Beylagan districts. There was also discussion on the possibility of gathering data on mine victim needs during the implementation of the ADIAR organization’s program for Fizuli and Goraboy districts from May to July.

All graphics courtesy of author.

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The Brcko District

The Brcko Municipal, located in northeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, was a fierce battleground during the war from 1992 to 1995. Because of the Brcko District’s unique, strategic and symbolic significance to all sides of the conflict, it was the site of an international mine action program established in December 1995, which divided the country into two decentralized semi-autonomous entities, the Republic of Srpska (populated mostly by Serbs) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (populated mostly by Muslims and Croats).

Instead, the issue of the Brcko area was referred to an arbitration tribunal, which after three years of deliberation and hearings, ruled in 1999 that the territory of the pre-war Brcko municipality would be awarded to neither entity. Instead it would be a "special district" held in "condominium" by both entities, which would delegate "all of its powers of governance" to a new "single, unitary, multi-ethnic, democratic government," called the Brcko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The new Brcko District Government, established on March 8, 2000, is directly accountable to a continuing international supervisory regime, the Office of the High Representative (OHR), and is considered one of the "special districts" in the country. The common institutions, laws and constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but all powers delegated to the entities are "exercised exclusively by the District government...."

The Landmine/UXO Situation in the Brcko District

Despite the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995, the legacies of that conflict continue to cripple the country in real and tangible ways. One of the most obvious is the contamination of enormous amounts of land, up to 4,000 square kilometers in all, by anti-personnel mines, anti-tank mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). Said the U.S. Department of State (DOS), "The effect of residual landmines as a result of heavy mining during the conflict on Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war recovery has been staggering."

According to the United Nations, writing at the end of December 2001: "Up to one million mines, mostly anti-personnel, and many types of unexploded ordinance (UXO) wait for an unacceptable toll on innocent victims" in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Frighteningly, only about 60 percent of mined areas have been identified."

More landmines in the country are concentrated on the Zone of Separation (ZOS, the four km wide demilitarized zone along the former frontline) and in areas of Sarajevo, Zavidovići and Brcko. Obviously, one of the highest concentrations is where the ZOS runs through the Brcko District, the area from which most refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) fled or were expelled but where they are now returning.

During the war, the Brcko District formed the narrowest point of the Republica Srpska’s (RS) viral supply corridor from Serbia and the western RS to the eastern RS. The Brcko District's highly strategic location made it an area of bitter and heavy fighting throughout the war. This "has made it one of the most heavily mine contaminated areas of the entire "B.""

Unfortunately, the landmine situation in Brcko has changed little over the last few years. According to the PRONI Institute of Social Education’s Brcko District Mine Awareness Team, from 1996 to now, there were 11,000,000 m2 of high risk areas and by the end of 2002, only 2,940,000 m2 will have been demined, meaning the demining process will take another 10 to 15 years more.

The BHMAC “Demining Strategy for Bosnia and Herzegovina,” noted in 2001 that 59.6 square km in the Brcko District is an “suspect area”—a total of 12,046 of the total Brcko District territory. These numbers contrast with 6.36 percent in the Federation, 1.71 percent in the Republika Srpska and a country-wide average of 4.20 percent.

Of this total 12 percent of territory, there are an estimated 36,700 landmines and UXOs and the area has been almost 100 mine/UXO accidents (almost 10 percent of all mine accidents in the country) and 38 deaths since the war in the Brcko District.

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