



Faces of Mine Action: AMMCO's Ermira Keraj

Ermira Keraj lives in the Kukes district of Albania, a region that until recently had the most landmine contamination in the country. Keraj became involved in mine action to make her country, especially her home district, a safer place to live. The Kukes district shares a border with Kosovo and was contaminated with landmines during the 1999 Kosovo crisis.¹ Based on the results of the General Survey carried out by the Albanian Armed Forces in 1999, an area of 15.25 million sq m (5.89 sq mi) was identified as contaminated. In addition to landmines, looting of military stockpiles during civil unrest in 1997 spread unexploded ordnance (UXO) throughout the country.² Since 1995, 979 casualties from mine/UXO accidents have been recorded in Albania (145 dead/834 injured).¹

A Success Story in Mine Action

Despite the casualties, mine action in Albania was an overall success, and Albania declared itself free of landmines in 2009. Albania cleared 16.6 sq km (6.41 sq mi) of land and destroyed 12,452 anti-personnel (AP) mines and 4,969 cluster munitions along its northeastern border.¹ Of the countries that ratified the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction* (Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMBC), Albania is one of the few that fulfilled its Article 5 mine clearance obligations.³ To be considered successfully mine-free under the APMBC, a country must remove all AP mines from all known mined areas within 10 years after ratifying the treaty.⁴ Albania became a States Party to the APMBC on 29 February 2000.³

In 2008, Keraj began working for the Albanian Mine Action Execution (AMAE) as an Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) specialist. After Albania was declared mine-free, AMAE was renamed the Albanian Mines and Munitions Coordination Office (AMMCO) to reflect its new mission of coordinating and monitoring UXO/explosive remnants of war (ERW) hotspot clearance operations carried out by international clearance organizations in cooperation with the Albanian armed forces, as well as risk education and mine victim assistance activities.

The success of the mine action program in Albania is largely due to the all-inclusive cooperation of the affected and interested parties and the strong support of the donor community and international organizations including the United Nations Development Programme, European Union, ITF Enhancing Human Security, and the governments of Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, U.K., and the U.S.

While attending the 2013 Senior Managers' Course (SMC) in ERW and Mine Action at James Madison University, Keraj presented lessons learned by Albania's mine action program to fellow participants. In her presentation, Keraj gave helpful advice for effective information management and the proper use of IMSMA software. Through her work, Keraj says she was able to be "a part of celebrating mine-free Albania." The reason for Albania's success, she says, is "We had a plan, we worked through the plan, and we achieved the goal."

Abandoned UXO Hot Spots


Although Albania is now landmine-free, work still remains. The mine action program in Albania changed its focus to areas with abandoned UXO contamination. They refer to these areas as **hot spots**. These hot spots were created mainly when ammunition storage sites were abandoned due to internal civilian uprisings in 1997, and subsequently exploded, contaminating the surrounding area with UXO.⁵ AMMCO has monitored the clearance in Albania since 2011 and has identified 19 hotspots.^{5,6}

Abandoned UXO explosions in hot-spot areas countrywide were responsible for 111 deaths and 596 injuries from 1997–2012.⁷ In addition to these hotspots, in 2008, an explosion at a munitions dismantling facility in the village of Gërdec (located approximately 13 km [8 m]) northwest from the capital, Tirana) killed 27 people and injured 300.¹ It is estimated that at least 9,000 tons of ammunition blew up during the accident, dispersing ordnance up to 2 km (1.24 mi) from the epicenter of the blast. Keraj further explains, "Hot spots are attractive to people without economic resources. They collect scrap metal (including munitions) for money even though they know it is dangerous."

The latest accident occurred as recently as June 2013.⁶ AMMCO aims to create public awareness and provide mine risk education in affected areas.

The organization also works to incorporate UXO survivors into victim assistance programs.⁵

Keraj admits that since Albania was declared free of landmines, procuring funding for the remaining work, such as abandoned UXO-removal programs, has become increasingly difficult. Additional challenges include providing better geographic information-system (GIS) images of hot-spot locations and information-management training, both of which can be costly.⁶

When Albania was declared landmine-free in 2009, Keraj says a common phrase used throughout AMMCO was, "Together, we made it happen," as a celebration of Albania's accomplishments. Mine action organizations within Albania now work with the same determination to rid the country of its remaining ERW. 

~ Brenna Feigleson, an editorial assistant at the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR), interviewed Ermira Keraj when she attended the 2013 Senior Managers' Course (SMC) on ERW and Mine Action at James Madison University. The SMC is organized by CISR and funded by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA).



Ermira Keraj at the 2013 Senior Manager's Course in ERW and Mine Action. Photo courtesy of CISR.

Endnotes

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