Albania Makes Progress in Demilitarization

Matt Goodyear
United States Army

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal

Part of the Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol14/iss3/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.
Albania Makes Progress in Demilitarization

With the goal of destroying all excess munitions by 2013, the Albanian government is working to eliminate stockpiles of excess military munitions. Following a 2008 deadly explosion at a munitions dismantling factory, the government established safer mandates and successfully destroyed thousands of tons of munitions.

by Captain Matt Goodyear | United States Army

Two years after the 2008 deadly explosion\(^1\) at a demilitarization\(^2\) facility on the outskirts of Tirana, Albania’s capital, the Albanian government has made significant progress in reducing excess stockpiles and demilitarizing hazardous and obsolete ordnance. Although ridding the country of more than 100,000 tons (9,072 metric tons) of outdated and dangerous munitions and weapons has been a formidable challenge, the government’s efforts, in conjunction with the international community, have resulted in a robust and effective demilitarization program. Another 5,000 tons (4,536 metric tons) is expected to be destroyed by the end of 2010. This notable improvement in the management of Albania's excess munitions stockpiles reflects the government's commitment to the process and illustrates the impact of international contributions and collaboration.

Albania's History of Explosives

The communist period of Albania’s history (1946–91) was marked by a massive build-up in munitions and weapons of Albanian, Chinese and Soviet origin. Hundreds of depots were placed in every corner of Albania and were stocked with more than 100,000 tons (9,072 metric tons) of munitions. Each depot housed various types of munitions that became potentially dangerous after years of degradation. With the fall of communism in 1991, maintenance and management of the depots was neglected, and when anarchy enveloped the country in 1997, many depots were damaged, destroyed, or looted. After stability was restored, the return of reclaimed military munitions and weapons has been a formidable challenge, the government’s efforts, in conjunction with the international community, have resulted in a robust and effective demilitarization program.

Gërdec Depot

Some demilitarization efforts began in 2001, including an assistance project by the NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency, which destroyed more than 8,700 tons (7,892 metric tons) of munitions between 2002 and 2007. Then, on 15 March 2008, a massive explosion occurred at an ammunition dismantling facility in Gërdec, 30 kilometers (19 miles) west of Tirana and 3 kilometers (2 miles) from the national airport. Previously home to a tank division, the site had been converted to allow a private company to demilitarize ordnance and sell the scrap residue. The residents of the area were unwittingly living too close to the factory, and the blast killed 26 people, injuring more than 300.\(^2\) The explosion's cause is still unknown; however, unsafe standards and practices were clearly being used at the Gërdec facility. As a result of this disaster, the Minister of Defence, along with 29 other people, was subsequently charged with abuse of office. The explosion and the public outcry that ensued brought demilitarization efforts in Albania to a standstill and created an atmosphere of paralysis in the Albanian Ministry of Defence. During the months immediately following the disaster, Albania, with technical assistance from the international community, worked to establish the necessary legal framework to demilitarize munitions and upgrade the decrepit facilities to reduce risk.

The National Plan

In the summer of 2008, the Albanian government established a plan to demilitarize the remaining 85,800–90,000 tons (77,111–81,647 metric tons) of various ordnance types. According to the plan, three primary factories would be used for industrial dismantling and destruction, including cutting open the mortars and removing the explosives, and eight demolition ranges would be used for open detonation\(^3\) and burning. To realize this goal, significant financial and other contributions would be needed not only by the Albanian government, but also by foreign donors and international institutions. An ongoing demilitarization project managed by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) was expanded to provide an additional US$2 million for the Gërdec munitions clean-up.\(^4\) In addition, the international community\(^5\) offered financial support and expertise to safely clear the explosion site and demilitarize the remaining stockpiles.

Mjekes Explosives Factory

During its 2001–07 project, NAMS developed part of the communist-era Mjekes explosives factory (just east of Elbasan in central Albania) to destroy small-arms ammunition. As a result of the project and a successful business in reprocessing explosive material, the Mjekes explosives factory received significant investment and was developed into a modern facility. In 2008, the Mjekes factory purchased two band saws to destroy 3,400 tons (3,084 metric tons) of 160mm mortars. After cutting the mortars and revealing the explosives, the workers used a steam generator to remove the explosives, and the shells were either discarded or sold for scrap. The explosives were then either burned or reprocessed to sell as low-grade explosives.

The Mjekes factory began processing the 160mm mortars in January 2009, and by June 2010, had successfully completed the project without incident. The factory line is now being adjusted to dismantle the approximately 11,000 tons (9,979 metric tons) of excess...
Polican also benefits from a PM/WRA-funded portion unit for detonation activities. The Albanian Armed Forces EOD team also received training from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency and U.S. EOD Navy experts. While the memorandum of understanding was signed in 2007, however, open detonation of hazardous ordnance by 2013. With 75,000 tons (68,037 metric tons) of ordnance identified for destruction, experts concur that this is an ambitious goal. To support demilitarization, the Albanian government and PM/WRA jointly funded a NAMSA feasibility study to assess a possible NAMSA project built upon the success of its 2002-07 project. In March 2010, NATO members approved the project and opened a NAMSA office in Tirana in September 2010. With the memorandum of understanding between NAMSA and the government of Albania is still under review, experts anticipate demilitarization under this long-term project will begin in January 2011, funded primarily by the United States, following the signing of the MOU.

Through these projects, Albania is developing specialized EOD and demilitarization capabilities that are in high demand throughout the region. As the country completes its national demilitarization plan, the Albanian government and military will end up with a viable skill set that could be beneficial to NATO and other countries with deteriorating stockpiles. Likewise, the Mjekës factory, with minor upgrades in equipment and training, could become a regional hub for demilitarization. While the prospect of regional weapons destruction cooperation may seem ambitious, a regional approach to stockpile reduction is beginning to take shape. By taking advantage of assistance from the international community, Albania is strengthening its expertise, gaining proficiency in munitions and ordnance handling, and is establishing appropriate munitions dismantling and destruction facilities.

The incinerator, which went into use in January 2010, can burn between five and eight tons (5.54 and 7.26 metric tons) of bullets per day. To date, it has destroyed approximately 360 tons (327 metric tons) of 7.62mm bullets.

120mm rounds. The government of Denmark through the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe recently donated to Mjekës four more band saws to establish a second dismantling line to handle other large-caliber munitions.

Polican Munitions Factory

While the communist-era Policam munitions factory near Berat in Southern Albania was part of the original NAMSA project, it did not receive capital investment, and its technology and upkeep were significantly behind Mjekës. PM/WRA assisted the government of Albania by funding a U.S. contractor, Armor Group, to supervise demilitarization operations there. Policam did not have the capital to buy band saws, and thus, demilitarization occurred through simple dismantling (unscrewing the heads and steaming out the explosives). In May 2009, Policam began the demilitarization of 82mm Chinese-made mortars with TNT explosives. In early 2010, Policam received a donation of four band saws from Denmark. With these band saws, the factory is developing a dismantling line to demilitarize the more sensitive Amatol-filled Soviet mortars. So far, Policam has destroyed 2,300 tons (2,087 metric tons) of Albania’s 15,000 tons (13,608 metric tons) of 82mm mortars.

Policam also benefits from a PM/WRA-funded portable incinerator for use in destroying small caliber ammunition, beginning with 7.62mm bullets. The incinerator heats the bullets until the gunpowder explodes, leaving the melted brass and lead for scrap.