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The Terter Regional Vocational Training Center

Recently, International Eurasia Press Fund helped to form the Terter Regional Vocational Training Center to provide computer, business and vocational training for mine victims and their family members. The victims are also given medical and legal help by the Azerbaijan Mine Victims Association. The VTC and the AMVA both work to help war victims reintegrate into society.

by Nick Nwolisa [International Eurasia Press Fund]

The Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action was established in 1998 and since then, has carried out mine-clearance operations and humanitarian support in several regions and communities in Azerbaijan. Beginning in 2000, the International Eurasia Press Fund joined ANAMA in conducting various surveys to determine the impact of landmines on Azerbaijani territory. The survey results indicated that mine victims predominately resided in Agstafa, Fizuli, Goranboy and Terter.

In 2004, ANAMA worked with IEPF to conduct the Mine Victims Needs Assessment project. The project documented some of the challenges mine victims faced, such as:

- They were in urgent need of financial assistance.
- The families that had lost their bread-winners in the war needed assistance in establishing small-scale businesses to support themselves.
- Mine victims often faced legal challenges, particularly while trying to obtain their disabled status, citizenship registration card, etc.
- Both victims and people residing in mine-affected regions needed mine-risk education because accidents continued to occur due to lack of information.
- Mine victims, their families and the local population residing in mine-affected regions needed access to urgent medical attention following mine accidents.
- Mine victims required assistance in community and mainstream-society reintegration.

In order to help mine victims overcome some of these challenges, IEPF decided it should first bring the mine victims together through the creation of an association. This association would serve as a platform where

different initiatives and programs related to victim assistance could be developed through ideas contributed by the mine victims themselves. Terter was the first region identified for bringing together victims because of the high number of mine victims residing there. More than half of the Terter region's territory remains under Armenian occupation, and landmines and unexploded ordnance affect a large portion of the land.

Azerbaijan Mine Victims Association

The Azerbaijan Mine Victims Association was formally established and registered with the Azerbaijan government in May 2007. Through its various achievements, the AMVA Terter branch was evaluated as a success by a committee within IEPF's executive board, and was highlighted by several international and local news outlets. Some of the achievements from AMVA Terter's project activities were:

- More than 50 mine victims received assistance in various legal matters, such as changing their federal disability status so their pensions aligned with the severity of their injuries and documenting marital status to allow access to family benefits.
- 140 mine victims actively participated in various training courses on small-scale business management, computer literacy and first aid.
- Three mine victims worked in various capacities in the regional IEPF offices.
- 27 mine victims received advanced medical diagnoses from specialists, which helped them access federal disability benefits.
- More than 30 mine victims received varying amounts of social assistance.

In 2008, based on AMVA Terter's success in assisting mine victims, the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), AMVA's original donor, financed the replication of similar actions in the Fizuli and Agstafa regions, and assisted AMVA in Terter with pursuing more activities. Most of the AMVA-Terter members joined the project working group, assisting mine victims with their legal issues and also providing courses in business training. Moreover, PM/WRA approved seed capital for providing microcredit loans to the mine victims. With this initial capital, the IEPF established the Avrasia-Kredit, Ltd., a non-banking organization distributing small loans to the less fortunate people in Agstafa, Fizuli and Terter. Additional financial donors, including CredAgro, AzerStar and AzerCredit, have increased the coffers of Avrasia-Kredit from an initial donation of US\$45,000 to \$600,000 recently, and Avrasia-Kredit is ranked among the top non-banking organizations allocating microcredit loans in the region, with more than 1,300 beneficiaries.

The mine victims who benefited from microcredit loans were mainly concerned with the expansion of their existing businesses, although some were interested in starting new businesses. IEPF and AMVA continued to provide business advice and entrepreneurial skills training to the mine victims and to a larger extent, the inhabitants of the communities in the regions. As the demand for microcredit swelled, a need to create a viable and sustainable source for



Trainees at the Terter Regional Vocational Training Center. Trainees are mine victims, spouses or family members of war victims.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

job creation grew; hence, the IEPF programs-development team established the Terter Regional Vocational Training Center.

The VTC was designed to not only help mine victims and their families gain the skills they needed to become self-sufficient, but IEPF suggested retired mine-clearance workers were in need of retraining, as well. Due to the extremely stressful nature of their work, mine-clearance workers normally retire from their positions at approximately 45 years of age; however, the law does not regulate the retirement age. IEPF noticed that many demining retirees had a difficult time finding other work and becoming financially independent because of the difficulty in transferring their unique skills into other professions. Vocational training is needed to help them find employment in other fields and reintegrate into society. Consequently, deminers were encouraged to attend the training courses.

Training Center Goals and Strategies

On 30 March 2010, the VTC officially announced its opening. IEPF, in close collaboration with the Terter region's local municipalities, organized the ceremony, and many dignitaries attended, including PM/WRA's Azerbaijan Country Program Manager, Katherine Baker, and Michael Gaunt, the military attaché for the U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan, along with a large number of community members. ANAMA's Information Manager, Murad Rahimov, also attended the opening ceremony to express ANAMA's desire to ensure mine-free zones in Azerbaijan's border territories. During the ceremony, Vudadi Isayev, the head of the local authority, expressed his delight with the continuous financial support of the United States.

The Terter Regional Vocational Training Center is unique, teaching food and nutrition skills; domestic skills such as painting, carpet weaving and decorative design; and tech-



IEPF Chairman Umud Mirzayev and the project working group meet with staff of the Terter Regional Vocational Training Center.

nical skills like electrical wiring, carpentry, and advertising and graphic design. VTC also provides training on agricultural practices, business skills and microfinance management. The first participants were drawn from the Terter region, but VTC expects others will come from the Agdam, Goranboy and Goygol regions. Presently, the two-story VTC building has various offices, restroom facilities and two training rooms that can seat up to 20 persons per room.

In the future, VTC will enroll war victims and retired deminers, irrespective of their locations. To accommodate the needs of these remote victims, VTC envisions having approximately six lodging rooms for participants and trainers from more distant regions of Azerbaijan, as well as a conference hall that can seat approximately 120 people.

During the opening ceremony, the chairman of IEPF, Umud Mirzayev, outlined the VTC's overall goals, which include developing income-generating skills for war victims, their family members and retired humanitarian mine-action personnel, as well as integrating those trained into mainstream society. To succeed, IEPF will assist with constructing and equipping the VTC, operating the VTC (train-

ing component), and finding job placements or business opportunities for the mine victims and the retired deminers.

Various local and international specialists and experts were involved in creating the VTC's training curriculum. The curriculum designed for VTC is modeled after best practices recommended by the International Labour Organization, and IEPF also has adopted several curriculum materials from Western Australia's Department of Education and Training and various similar institutions in the United States. Although VTC will use local experts as trainers, it will also work with established international organizations, particularly U.N. agencies with similar practices.

The training procedure followed by the trainers will be conducted using three learning approaches as outlined in the document, "Professional Development Framework for Vocational Skills of Vocational Education and Training Practitioners."²¹ The three teaching methods are:

- **Formal learning:** a program of instruction emphasizing theory through classroom materials and shared documents
- **Non-formal learning:** a program of instruc-

tion in which learners put into practice all theorized learning processes. The learners begin to develop actual vocational skills in this stage.

- **Informal learning:** At this stage, learners are encouraged to practice skills outside VTC's walls, through their daily work and social, family or leisure activities.

VTC's Operations and Activities

In the first week of May 2010, VTC officially opened its operations, with the commencement of four vocational training courses including carpet weaving, food and nutrition, advertising and graphic design, and agricultural practices. Participants were from 18 to 50 years of age. Most of the male participants joined the agricultural courses, while the women took the carpet weaving and food and nutrition classes. The advertising and graphic design course attracted younger participants, both male and female. The first group of VTC participants were either mine victims or the spouse/other family member of a war victim; two mine-clearance workers enrolled in the subsequent class.

As VTC's main focus is providing participants with the skills to help them attain gainful employment, the VTC manager will closely collaborate with IEPF to find suitable places where the VTC graduates' newly acquired skills will be needed. Some of the graduates will be encouraged to start their own small businesses or even joint ventures. Microcredit loans from Avrasia-Kredit are easily accessible to VTC graduates.



One of the participants in the carpet weaving class displays her skills on knitting.

IEPF plans to expand and improve the VTC. Hopefully, international agencies and organizations will take advantage of the unique building housing the VTC. War victims, refugees, internally displaced people, local communities and deminers still need assistance. The VTC is a collective community resource, functioning to benefit the general public. In addition, VTC plans to diversify to also include the promotion of agricultural practices as one of its core activities, since this is the primary trade of the region's inhabitants. Although VTC has taught agricultural classes for quite some time, it plans to extend the training program to its commercial farm and provide on-the-job training for mine victims and their family members. The sales generated from the farm would be used for salaries and running the farm. ♣

see endnotes page 80



Nick Nwolisa was born in Kaduna, Nigeria. He was educated in Nigeria, where he studied biochemistry at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka, Anambra state. He worked briefly with the Departments of Safety, Health and Environmental Affairs of Exxon Mobil in Nigeria before he moved to Azerbaijan for further studies at Khazar University, Baku, and the Baku Slavic University. Presently, he is Head of Programs Development and International Relations. He is also a columnist with the *Nigeria World* online news forum and analyst of Nigerian affairs on various international news outlets.

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