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Demining Albania 2000–2009: Successes and Lessons Learned

Following the 1999 Kosovo conflict, Albania sought the most efficient method for demining its land. Mine-action efforts were effectively jump-started with the creation of the Albanian Mine Action Executive, as well as the ratification of the Ottawa Convention. Support from mine-clearance partners and international donors has significantly enhanced the demining effort. This article reviews lessons learned in the process of demining Albania that can be used in future mine-clearance operations.

by Gregor Sančanin [International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance]

On 1 December 2009, at the Cartagena Summit on a Mine-Free World held in Colombia, Albania officially declared it had reached mine-free status and that it had met its Ottawa Convention Article 5 obligations. All three partners implementing the demining requirements for Albania, namely the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance, the Albanian Mine Action Executive and DanChurchAid, hosted a joint event, “Demining Albania 2000–2009,” to highlight Albania’s achievements, challenges and lessons learned over 10 years of operation.

During that time, ITF raised a total of US\$25.6 million for mine-action work in Albania; \$19.6 million of the money raised was used for clearance activities, with the rest of the money being used for mine-risk education, victim assistance, equipment, structures and operations support. The total land released for local use as a result of these actions was 16.6 square kilometers (6.4 square miles).

Contamination History

During the 1999 Kosovo conflict, mines were laid and submunitions released inside Albanian territory. Moreover, cluster strikes were conducted on military positions along the Albanian northeast border region, which added to the country’s contamination. Contaminated areas extended along the Alba-

nian border, from Montenegro in the north to Macedonia in the south. At that time, approximately 25,500 residents inhabited 39 villages in northeast Albania, including the towns of Kukës, Has, and Tropojë.

Since 1999, 210 mine and unexploded ordnance accidents have occurred, with 238 persons injured and 34 killed. Many of the accidents happened while victims were performing daily activities such as farming, grazing cattle or walking to school. Mine/UXO contamination also obstructed the border police from effectively patrolling the area to prevent trafficking of drugs, weapons and people, as well as and other criminal activities. Accidents were curtailed in 2003 when the ITF funded numerous mine-risk-education programs in the region, and there have been no mine/UXO accidents since 2005.

Identifying and Solving the Problem

After the Kosovo conflict ceased, the Albanian government tackled the problem of mine/UXO contamination by engaging the Albanian Armed Forces to conduct rapid surface clearance. However, as the clearance was not performed to International Mine Action Standards, the areas later had to be cleared again after Albania adopted IMAS in 1999. Initially, 15,250,000 square meters (3,768 acres) in 102 contaminated locations were identified along a 120-kilometer (74.6-mile) stretch of



Deminers work to remove landmines and ERW on steep, mountainous terrain in Albania, 2009.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF ITF/DCA

the border and up to 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) inside Albania.

Toward the end of 1999, the Albanian government adopted IMAS and established the Albanian Mine Action Committee. The AMAC was formed to engage in humanitarian-mine-action policies and oversee the full implementation of IMAS. Later, the Albanian government created the Albanian Mine Action Executive to carry out AMAC's policies. The responsibilities of AMAE include coordinating and monitoring mine-action activities, as well as planning, prioritizing and accrediting mine-action implementing agencies in Albania. On 29 February 2000, the government of Albania (GoA) ratified the Ottawa Convention, and committed to destroying all stockpiles of anti-personnel mines by

2004 and to clearing all mine-contaminated areas by 2010. This action set the timeline for future clearance activities.

Clearance Implementation

During a national workshop in June 2002, the GoA joined with relevant stakeholders and participants—AMAC, AMAE, ITF, DanChurchAid, *Fondation Suisse de Déminage*, local mine-affected communities and mine victims—to lay the foundation for future cooperation and implementation of a national mine-action plan. Through the vision, mission and priorities established during this workshop, the GoA, in partnership with AMAC and AMAE, created a mine-action plan to clear all mine-contaminated areas in Albania by 2010. ITF, donors and implementing agencies (espe-

cially DCA) also helped coordinate the implementation of the plan.

National Capacity Support

In April 2002, the GoA reached an agreement with the United Nations Development Programme in Albania to provide support for mine action through direct financial and technical assistance to AMAE. Several UNDP Chief Technical Advisors, including Quality Management and Victim-assistance Advisors, provided assistance to help the national staff acquire the necessary technical knowledge. In addition, ITF conducted several management and technical trainings to enhance the managerial and technical skills of the AMAE staff.

Quality assurance and quality control are necessary components of all clearance activities; therefore,

AMAE established a Quality Management Team in June 2002 in the regional office in Kukës. It then trained and equipped the QM Team to conduct QA and QC of all ongoing mine-clearance activities. Subsequently, by applying all relevant procedures and standards, the AMAE QM Team certified the cleared land in the Kukës region as mine free and handed the land over to the affected community.

With support from the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, the AMAE began using the Information Management System for Mine Action in 2003, through which it recorded residual threats and clearance-operation progress. AMAE has been instrumental in coordinating with government institutions and agencies involved in mine action, including other mine-action activities such as mine-risk education and assistance to mine/UXO victims.



A dog team searches for mines.

Mine-clearance Partners

Since December 2002, AMAE has set mine/UXO clearance priorities in cooperation with implementing partners. AMAE applied a “bottom-up” consultation process in which consultation begins with local village leaders, community councils and border police, culminating with military and regional authorities. Final approval comes from AMAC and the GoA.

AMAE has also played an important role in accrediting demining operators and assigning task areas based on the operational plan for clearance activities. Four demining organizations and companies were involved in mine clearance in Albania.

From 2000–01, RONCO Consulting Corporation was primarily responsible for assessing the extent of mine contamination and performing clearance operations. The nongovernmental organization HELP conducted clearance operations from 2000–01, and from 2000–03 FSD conducted survey and clearance operations.

DCA also started survey and clearance operations in Albania in February 2002. Since 2004 it has been the only demining operator in Albania. Other operators gradually pulled out for various reasons, including lack of funding. Originally, DCA clearance assets consisted of manual teams, demining machines and mine-detection dogs; beginning in 2007, DCA operated solely with manual-demining teams and created a fully nationalized program utilizing only one expatriate Program Manager. DCA has been contributing to mine clearance in Albania longer than any other operators, and the valuable effects of its work have been recognized by many involved actors, such as the GoA, ITF and other donors.

Funding and Donors

One of ITF’s major roles is working with donors to create successful mine-action programs. In the area of donor support in mine action, according to our practical experience and GICHD theory,¹ there are three important phases:

Phase 1. The first phase is the immediate emergency response, which involves establishing the framework for creating mine-action capacities. At this stage, it is crucial that sufficient donor funds are available for relatively immediate release. Funding was initially an issue for Albania as donors were not sufficiently aware of the humanitarian problems posed by mines and UXO in the country.

The ITF joined ongoing efforts by the Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (now the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement or PM/WRA), its main donor, and soon afterward, funds for the first demining project were provided by OHDP to ITF. In 2001, financial support more than doubled as Switzerland joined the donor base.

It is important .are created at an early stage. ITF, UNDP and other donors initiated this process in Albania. The needs in affected countries can only be addressed properly by creating and developing a well-balanced national mine-action program that enables the mine-

affected country to effectively confront and address its mine problem. Over the years most donations were provided through ITF, but AMAE also received direct support from several other international donors. The additional donors that contributed directly to AMAE (i.e., not via ITF) through UNDP were: the Delegation of the European Union to Albania, France, the International

From 2005, the government of Albania, through the Ministry of Defence, supported and facilitated demining operations by providing the following in-kind donations: explosive materials for mine/UXO destruction and helicopter transport service for medical evacuation in the case of demining accidents. This level of assistance from the government sent a strong signal to donors

remaining mine-affected land in Albania. ITF, AMAE, and DCA recognized the need for immediate action by creating another joint strategic plan, providing a concrete deadline to reach the declaration of a mine-free Albania. Based on the previous seven years of experience, the strategic plan outlined steps to maintain donor interest and assist with operational planning. The new strategic plan succeeded in securing continuous donor support until all mine-affected land was cleared and released.

There is no rigid system or method of operating that would guarantee the successful resolution of any particular country's mine problem. In Albania's case, the joint and coordinated efforts of all stakeholders led to its accomplishments. ITF worked with many donors to provide sufficient funding for the mine-free Albania program. It raised and distributed \$25.6 million for mine action in Albania, including \$19.6 million that was used solely for clearance activities. The following donors supported ITF: PM/WRA, Germany, UNDP-Albania, DCA, Switzerland, European Commission, UK/DFID, Handicap International, Canada, FSD, Luxembourg and the Czech Republic.

Completion

The final year of clearance operations in Albania was the most difficult. The plan for clearing all mine- and cluster-contaminated areas by the end of the 2009 demining season left no room for delays. Moreover, the remaining remote highland areas proved to be the most challenging because these areas were extremely difficult to access and the demining equip-



Dogs provide quality control of the demining site.

Committee of the Red Cross, PM/WRA, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Switzerland, Turkey, UNICEF and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development.

Phase 2. The second phase is the period when the response structure and operational framework were established, and operations are underway. At this stage, significant efforts are still required to maintain the interest of current donors, as well as to attract new ones. For Albania the peak of this period was in the 2006 demining season when various donors contributed a total of \$3.3 million, after which the majority of high-impact areas were cleared.

that proved it was taking its obligations seriously.

Phase 3. The third and final phase is the most difficult as the results from Phases 1 and 2 become known. If operations from the first two phases prove unsuccessful, less time and resources are available to achieve the initial goals.

Despite the success of the 2006 demining season in which two-thirds of all affected land was cleared and released, mine-affected land remained. There was fear that following the achievements of the 2006 demining season, donors would shift their attention to other affected countries and there would not be sufficient funds to clear the

ment had to be transported by horses through the steep, harsh, remote terrain. Final completion activities required a strong focus on maintaining the deminers' motivation while also maintaining productivity levels and ensuring safety.

In total, the government of Albania returned to use 16,608,055 square meters (4,104 acres) of land on 207 project locations through various methods of release including mine clearance, battle-area clearance, release by non-technical means (such as reduction by cancellation and IMSMA data correction) and technical means (such as Technical Survey and clearance).

According to AMAE's final results, 17,569 explosive devices (12,452 anti-personnel mines, 152 anti-tank mines and 4,965 pieces of UXO) were cleared with the use of donor funds. ITF alone was responsible for funding the clearance of 15,970 items.

Upon completion of any such long-term program wherein national staff is employed, it is important to look beyond clearance deadlines and try to provide some sort of livelihood security for the ex-deminers. Therefore, DCA and ITF prepared projects and secured funding for vocational re-training of local demining staff to ensure that alternatives for employment would exist after mine-action operations ended. This vocational training played an important role in maintaining the local deminers' motivation and secured their dedication to clearing their land from the scourge of landmines and cluster munitions.

Post-clearance Evaluation

A significant phase of the clearance process is conducting a post-clearance assessment and survey approximately nine to 18 months after an area has been cleared. The value of such an assessment is that the clearance-area-prioritization system, drawn from IMAS and IMSMA databases, can be validated. Thus, feedback from the local community regarding the confidence of the work performed is secured. Such information enables local and national authorities to make more focused and detailed decisions on future plans for infrastructure development or improvements in formerly mine-affected regions. At the same time, full transparency is provided to donors; they are able to see where their funding has been applied and how it has been used in the clearance process.

DCA's post-clearance impact-survey activities are ongoing. Preliminary results indicate that the main ob-



Manual demining is an arduous task.

stacles caused by landmines have been removed as a result of clearance activities, and formerly contaminated areas have been returned to local residents, providing safe access to grazing land and natural resources, as well as allowing for the safe use of paths, roads and bridges. This outcome shows that the local residents have a high degree of trust in the clearance process, due to the fact that the land is being used for these purposes.

Program Experience

The valuable lessons and experiences listed below were gained through the engagement of stakeholders in the Albanian mine-action program. As the majority of mine-action programs cycle through three project phases—emergency, development and completion—the lessons learned through the Albanian demining program could be applied to other programs.

Lessons learned. This list encompasses some of the key lessons learned during the implementation of the Albanian demining program.

1. All stakeholders, including national authorities, mine-action centers, operators and donors must have a commonly defined vision and goal. Plans and results should be regularly assessed and discussed jointly.
2. There should be national ownership of the mine-action program, including a national capacity-building plan, time framework, clear benchmarks and sustainable funding, all clearly defined from the start, as well as full commitment from all parties.
3. The IMSMA database should be finalized before the clearance program closes and then transferred to



Vegetation must be removed before demining can begin.

- the appropriate ministry or entity so it can be available if information from the database is required later.
4. All national staff should be informed of closure plans from the program's beginning in a transparent manner (and also of any plans beyond completion, if applicable).
5. During the final phases, operations must remain tightly controlled and monitored to assure order, productivity and safety.
6. Close liaison with the local mine-action authority, operators and donors should be maintained to ensure common understanding of clearance processes and progress.
7. Liaisons should keep local communities fully informed during clearance operations and completion phases.
8. A post-clearance impact assessment/survey should be conducted to ensure the land cleared and handed over is used, proving that the local population has confidence in clearance operations.
9. Planning based on results must be transparently and constantly presented to donors. Such actions ensure continuous donor interest and reaffirm their belief in the joint vision and plan.
10. Advocacy efforts are crucial to ensuring that focus is maintained on remaining problems during the last years of clearance. If focus wavers, there is always a threat that donors will slowly lose interest and shift their priorities to other areas or regions in the final stage of contamination reduction.
11. Actual results achieved through the use of donor funds should be readily available during all phases of the mine-action program.

Conclusion

Passion, hard work, determination, and direct and frequent communication between all involved partners were key variables that contributed to a successful mine-action program in Albania. Unlike many programs, which close down because of inadequate funding,

poorly run operations and insufficient output, the Albanian mine-action program terminated only when the job was completed and Albania could be declared mine free. ♦

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