

Land Cancellation and Release

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Initial surveying and resurveying of areas contaminated with mines are imperative processes in the Land Cancellation and Release process in Tajikistan, where estimates indicate thousands of acres of Suspected Hazardous Areas. It is necessary to re-survey contaminated areas is necessary to ensure accurate results. Even with limited funds, the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre has made great efforts to release the land and promote mine-risk education, victim assistance, and capacity building.

In the land-release process, initial surveys play an important role, providing the main information regarding the impact of mined areas. All plans regarding Technical Survey, clearance, mine-risk education, victim assistance and other mine-action activities are developed according to the data collected during the initial survey. If the data is accurate and reliable, it will be used throughout the duration of the mine-action program's existence. If the data is inaccurate, the areas will be unable to be considered fully cleared (though it is possible that a large percentage of the area is safe), and it will be time-consuming to re-conduct survey operations in the areas that have already been surveyed. Though multiple survey operations require additional expenditures, they are necessary and should be conducted periodically for verification, confirmation, cancellation or reduction of areas, according to the applicable criteria.

Extent of the Problem

In Tajikistan, 456,790 people approximately currently live in mine-affected areas, approximately 70 percent of whom are women and children.¹ Hazardous areas are usually located in hills and mountains where most villages are located, causing a negative impact on development in these locations. Usually the threat from mines and unexploded ordnance, including unexploded cluster munitions, is greatest in the summer, when people travel to mountain areas to pasture their sheep, collect wood and stones, pick berries, harvest grass and perform other activities related to normal rural life.

An initial Impact Survey carried out by the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre's partner, the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action, from 2003–2005 identified 146 Suspected Hazardous Areas covering 49,637,637 square

meters (12,266 acres). Following the Impact Survey, requests for clearance and Technical Survey from the government, local authorities and ministries identified an additional 13 SHAs covering 858,018 square meters (212 acres). Also, during initial clearance operations, an additional 172,617 square meters (43 acres) were recorded. Therefore, the original total suspected landmine contamination of Tajikistan included 159 SHAs covering 50,668,272 square meters (12,520 acres).

Due to the inexperience of the initial survey teams, lack of minefield records and other important information, and paucity of proper survey equipment, the first Impact Survey did not yield high-quality results. The sizes of SHAs were miscalculated and their descriptions were not clearly recorded. In addition, because the Tajik-Afghan border was guarded by Russian forces, access to border areas was limited. Likewise, access to areas along the Tajik-Uzbek border was and remains limited. For this reason, resurvey of these areas is necessary.

Using minefield records, TMAC is conducting resurvey operations along the Tajik-Afghan border. By the end of 2009, resurvey operations there will be completed and the mine-action program will have full and reliable information on mine-contaminated areas in the region, as well as in the country. Currently there are approximately 6 square kilometers (2 square miles) remaining to be surveyed. TMAC estimates that approximately 15 square kilometers (6 square miles) are contaminated by mines.

Prioritizing Funding

Because of a need to prioritize limited funding, mine-action programs often have difficulty reaching an appropriate end state. As a result, the Tajikistan Mine Action Programme, which encompasses the mine-action center,



This area in Shuroobod district is perfect for mechanical demining machines and very difficult for manual clearance. Due to the lack of machines, TMAC must clear it manually. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

government ministries and mine-action nongovernmental organizations in Tajikistan, prioritizes limited funding to reach an end state as soon as possible. Therefore, 80 percent of mine-action funding in the Tajikistan program goes toward mine-clearance operations and the other 20 percent is used for capacity building, mine-risk education and victim-assistance activities. Approximately 5–6 percent of mine-clearance funding goes to land release by survey teams.

Land-release Results

Since the beginning of operations, Tajikistan has made great efforts to release SHAs. As of December 2008, the TMAP has released 44,538,387 square meters (11,006 acres) of land, and in the process, has destroyed 9,944 anti-personnel mines, 12 anti-tank mines and 1,884 pieces of UXO. Of this total, 42,268,367 square meters (10,445 acres) were released as safe through resurvey and land-release projects and

2,279,020 square meters (563 acres) were released through clearance. During resurvey operations, 18 SHAs were cancelled because they were found to be safe, and 92 new mined areas with an approximate size of 2,925,746 square meters (723 acres) were identified.

According to the Tajikistan National Mine Action Standards, all mined areas or SHAs should be 100-percent cleared. Surveys of cleared areas showed that cleared lands are being used by the local population for agriculture, gardening, pasturing, etc. According to conversations with local authorities and inhabitants, as a result of observing clearance operations, people are confident that cleared lands are safe for use and that all landmines and UXO have been removed.

Conclusion

Considering the potential errors in the initial surveying process, it is an absolute necessity to resurvey SHAs if the land is ever released. Despite

limited funding, minimal equipment and inexperience, allocating funds for surveys to ensure full clearance is a highly productive enterprise, especially when contrasted with the startling alternative. ♦

See Endnotes, page 62



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