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The Role of Education on Awareness of Ammunition-dismantling Risks

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The Role of Education on Awareness of Ammunition-dismantling Risks

The blasts from an ammunition-dismantling factory in Gërdec, Albania, an accident caused by untrained employees at the facility, resulted in deaths and injuries and damaged homes for factory workers and nearby villagers in March 2008. This article suggests that training employers and workers to follow necessary safety procedures, as well as raising village awareness of the dangers of these ammunitions facilities, will help prevent such tragedies from occurring in the future.

by Brunilda Zenelaga [Aleksandër Moisiu State University]

On 18 March 2008, I traveled with a group of students and professors from Aleksandër Moisiu State University of Durres in Albania to the site of an explosion at an ammunition-dismantling factory in Gërdec, Albania. The Albanian Red Cross had requested assistance helping the injured victims. Around 200 people, inhabitants of Gërdec village in Vora municipality, roughly 14 kilometers (9 miles) from Tirana, had lost their houses in the blast. The Resort of the Ministry of Order, a state-owned resort in Pjepa, Durres, temporarily sheltered most of the displaced residents, while others were housed in privately owned resorts in the same area.

The Site of the Tragedy

The accident in Gërdec occurred on 15 March 2008 in one of the depots where obsolete munitions were being dismantled by many untrained and inexperienced workers. The explosions continued for 14

Kurdish Seasonal Mine Action Magazine Published

The Fria Society for Mine Action Professionals recently published its third issue of the Kurdish Seasonal Mine Action Magazine. The Kurdish-language publication, which is produced by FISMAP, is meant to be an educational aid for the organization’s members and includes articles on topics such as mine-risk education, mine-action news, current research on demining methods and analyses of different communities within Iraqi Kurdistan that have been affected by explosive remnants of war. The magazine’s readership is not limited to members of the organization, however, as the publication is circulated among other related parties within Iraqi Kurdistan, ranging from government institutions and ministries to independent nongovernmental organizations and private companies working in the field.

The publication’s staff includes some of the area’s top mine-action experts, including FISMAP Director Jaid J. Hussian, Editor-in-Chief Gaylan K. Answe and Managing Editor Ako Azz Hamad, all of whom also work for the Iraqi Kurdistan Mine Action Agency, the region’s mine-action organization.

FISMAP, formed in late 2006, is a nongovernmental, nonprofit group that seeks to support mine-action personnel and organizations inside the Iraqi Kurdistan. The organization has a membership of over 600 people and aims to help its members find jobs and assist their rehabilitation in the event of a demining accident. FISMAP also works with the Iraqi government and mine-action authorities to promote the creation of mine-action programs and initiatives with Iraqi Kurdistan.

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the ammunition-dismantling factory…in the ammunition-dismantling factory as our ‘savior’ because it was the only source of employment [available] for us. Nobody imagined that it would become ‘the death factory.’”

Through tears and trembling lips, Fatime discussed the moment of explosion. “The land [started shaking]. … I heard everywhere there were flames, fumes, broken glass. … A new house brings hope to people in Gërdec village.

Rebuilding houses in the village of Gërdec.

Preventing Another Disaster

Some of the ways to prevent future disasters in Albania and elsewhere include educating employers, creating awareness among workers, employers and local inhabitants; constructing homes and businesses only in safe areas (not always easy to do with growing populations expanding out from city centers); and providing proper training and oversight of ammunition-dismantling businesses and ammunition stockpiles.

Educatin employees. The inhabitants of Gërdec who worked at the ammunition-dismantling factory were not trained to do the work they were given. Instead of providing adequate training or hiring qualified workers, the employers took advantage of the workers’ inexperience to justify paying them lower salaries. These practices led to the fatal catastrophe.

A trained military team mobilized to collect and dismantle the ammunition can help avert disasters like the one in Gërdec by sharing its professional expertise with local inhabitants chosen to assist with the work. The workers should be properly trained before beginning the dangerous work, and competence must be educated about and respect the laws of employment.

Creating awareness. Economic need is often a motivating factor for people to participate in dangerous work, and to see my house and all the village as it was before. … I would like to open my eyes and see my house to be built in the village of Gërdec. The process of obtaining permission is very long, even if villagers have valid land on which they can build. ‘The inhabitants of Gërdec had moved from parts of northern Albania and establised their residence in Gërdec in the close ness to Tirana, [the] capital of Albania, was a very important reason to build the houses in this zone,” said Fatime. “We didn’t consider the military camp as a risk. We never thought that a tragedy could happen.

Sometimes prevention is more important than the remedy. For instance, raising awareness of the importance of building the houses in safe zones, far away from military units, dismantling factories and other dangerous areas, is essential. The government, educators, mass media, etc., should play a more active role in educating people about the risks of residing close to dangerous locations.

Providing proper oversight. The failure of the government and local institutions to manage the private companies involved in the ammunition-dismantling factory led to the employment of untrained workers. With stronger oversight and management of the private companies, the employers will know how to hire specialists and train people more successfully. This oversight should come with the proper authority and the ability to enforce safety policies and procedures that will ensure the safety of both the workers and the surrounding community.

Saving lives. The failings of the government and local institutions to manage the private companies involved in the ammunition-dismantling factory led to the employment of untrained workers. With stronger oversight and management of the private companies, the employers will know how to hire specialists and train people more successfully. This oversight should come with the proper authority and the ability to enforce safety policies and procedures that will ensure the safety of both the workers and the surrounding community.

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