The Role of Education on Awareness of Ammunition-dismantling Risks

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AICMA monitors the effectiveness of the campaigns presented by the campaign communicators. It also assesses how successful the educational materials are in spreading campaign messages and awareness to children and adults. Since 2004, there have been no reported incidents.

Phase four: AICMA’s program sustains motivation for safe behaviors by revisiting schools. The program underwrites the local construction of blackboards or additional school supplies to reinforce the campaign’s themes and in “Explosive Mines Kill” message.

MRE Campaigns and General Education

To date, no formal integration exists between MRE campaigns and state education programs. Nevertheless, teachers in each school review safety issues concerning anti-personal mines with their students. It is worth noting that MRE campaigns are organized and coordinated by the national demining authority known as the Centro de Desarrollo de Ecuadur’s Demining sector of the Ecuadorian Army, called the General Command, and the local Red Cross, participate as well.

It is essential to include the active participation of the government and its many stakeholders. Involvement by all stakeholders encourages the population to take safety precautions when faced with AP mines. This attention to proper procedures can help avoid injury and death.

The Personal Touch

In the remote region next to the international border with Peru, where most humanitarian-demining operations and MRE campaigns currently take place, person-to-person interaction is extremely important. Several Shuar communities still live as their ancestors did without electricity, roads or modern communications. Transistor radios and the occasional two-way radio are present, but the main form of communication remains personal interaction. AICMA MRE campaigns also take into account local customs, authority models, mainstream education levels and other cultural issues such as language and environment.

Successful communication with the indigenous population depends on effective methods of relaying information. AICMA’s AICMA’s successful MRE campaigns in Ecuador are based on their ability to deliver the programs locally, in a personal way.

A damanged house in Gërdec.

See Endnotes, Page 112

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 ammunition 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 300 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 Pulea, 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 Iraq’s 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 Jaijal J. Hussien, Editor-in-Chief Gaylan K. Anwer 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 660 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.

News Brief

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 ammunition facilities, will help prevent such tragedies from occurring in the future.

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The Albanian government estimated the cost of home repair to be around €17 million (US$23 million) in addition to costs for infrastructure repair. As of 28 March 2008, the government also allocated 156 million Albanian lek (US $1.6 million) to 5,000 families affected by the accident, with more financial support set aside for families who lost one or more loved ones in the blast.

Besides the contribution of disaster-relief specialists, international humanitarian assistance has included medical supplies, financial support and EOD teams. Also, the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance has aided the mayor of Gërdec in implementing victim-assistance and mine-risk education programs at local schools.

The event in Gërdec attracted international attention. Everyone wanted to know what Albania could do to avoid another catastrophe like the ammunition explosion.

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.

Educating employers. 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 respected in the laws of employment.

Creating awareness. Economic need is often a motivating factor for people to participate in an at-risk job for which they are not properly trained. In a society where the unemployment rate is very high, there is also a high probability that unqualified people will be hired or at least pay for jobs involving dangerous work about which they have little or no information. The people who worked at the ammunition factory in the hospital, according to Ristes, in vivo patients in hospitals suffered from injuries such as burns, broken arms and legs, and cuts from bits of broken glass.

At the outset of the Ministry of Order, where we went to offer our assistance, many of these workers and governmental and non-governmental organizations were also rendering aid. Those affected by the accident had varied responses. Some were able to speak and needed to talk about what they had seen and heard. Others preferred to stay alone, and it was difficult to offer them help. Most people, particularly the children, showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Fatime D., a woman from Gërdec who was wounded at the site-owned by Sterlings—said “We never thought this would happen. Most inhabitants of Gërdec village worked in the ammunition-dismantling factory—everyone, children, women and elders. Many of them didn’t [initially] know how to dismantle the ammunition, but they learned from each other while working there. We saw the dismantling factory as [our] ‘barracks’ because it was the only source of employment [available] for us. Nobody imagined that it would become ‘the death factory.’”


The explosion at the ammunition-dismantling factory at Gërdec village caused significant local damage. The Albanian authorities certify that 318 houses were completely ruined, 180 broke extreme damages, 200 suffered major damages and 1,400 lost minor or moderate damage. Since the disaster, both the Albanian government and international community have taken steps to assist and reconstruct the village.

Government Cleanup
Shortly after the disaster, the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team reported to Albania’s National Civil Emergency Management Plan for ongoing its help to government. The team of seven experts from various countries was sent on 20 March 2008. They collaborated with the United Nations Office for Coordination and U.N. country teams to survey the needs of the area and develop objectives for the future.

Immediately following the explosions, the Albanian Armed Forces deployed explosive-ordnance-disposal teams to danger areas and low-risk areas, stored with unexploded ordnance.” Sterling International and EOD Solutions were subcontracted by ArmorGroup North America and funded by the U.S. military department of State to help carry out UXO clearance operations in the at-risk areas.

According to the Albanian Anti-mining Committee’s Chief Executive Enonik Alibali, the population of Albania about the threats of mines and abandoned ammunition sites is important. Albanians have lived with the threat of mines for 50 years and are aware of the dangers involved. Alibali is threatened by other “Gëra” because of the accident, and some think it is just a matter of time until another ammunition site explodes. The country contains more than 20 arsenals and hundreds of thousands of tons of hidden ammunition.

The Testament of a Sapper