

Uzbekistan Ammunition Depot Explosion Cleanup: U.S. DoD Support

A recent ammunition explosion in Kagan, Uzbekistan, prompted an appeal for international aid. As a result, Lieutenant Colonel Gary Bolos led a team of Explosive Ordnance Disposal Non-Commissioned Officers from the United States Department of Defense into Uzbekistan to deliver equipment and train the Uzbek Army on proper detection and removal of the ammunition with a limited budget and restricted schedule.

by Matthew Voegel [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

On 21 July 2008, U.S. Department of State representatives in Uzbekistan, a former Soviet satellite nation located within Central Asia, contacted U.S. Army Central Command, the Army Service Component of Central Command. USARCENT received an e-mail including an itemized request from the Uzbekistan Ministry of Defense for three types of equipment: landmine detectors, underwater metal detectors and bomb suits.

Two weeks prior, on 10 July 2008, two explosions at an Uzbek Army base and ammunition depot had caused 150 million rounds of various ammunition to scatter over an eight-mile radius (12 kilometers) from the epicenter of the blast.² The ammunition depot was located outside the city of Bukhara in the small town of Kagan. Bukhara, which was located along the historically significant “Silk Road” during ancient times, was once one of the largest commercial centers not only in Central Asia, but in the world.³

Government Response

In order to control the situation, the government of Uzbekistan declared that the incident was indeed a “disaster,” thus giving it grounds to appeal for foreign aid. With that, the Uzbek Ministry of Defense looked to the U.S. Department of State for help. Uzbekistan requested U.S. assistance in obtaining adequate equipment and the necessary training to dispose of the massive amounts of unexploded ordnance that contaminated the area. The Department of State, in conjunction with its embassy in Uzbekistan, contacted the U.S. Department of Defense to assist in obtaining the equipment and training. USARCENT was given full responsibility for the mission, including the delivery of 150 landmine detectors, 50 underwater detectors and 20 bomb suits to the Uzbek Ministry of Defense.² In addition to the equipment, USARCENT was tasked with providing requisite training on the equipment for Uzbek military personnel to enable them to deal with their newfound UXO situation. This entire operation was carried out under the direction and supervision of Lieutenant Colonel Gary Bolos.

Bolos, a serviceman of 23 years and an Army EOD Officer since 1996, was on-site in the town of Kagan by early August with ARCENT Country Desk Officer Central Asian/South Asia Branch Chief LTC Mark Derber. “[The weapons] are not stored properly,” says Bolos. “There is a lot of open storage ... In that region, you can come from extreme cold to pretty hot [quickly] you have your extremes in weather. Anytime a chemical [is experiencing dramatic temperature change], it’s going to start [shifting] into an unstable form. Then you’re dealing with a lot of unstable munitions.”



Front gate of Kagan ammunition-supply point.
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF LTC GARY BOLOS

Background

During the 1980s, the military base at Kagan served as a large Soviet Army supply station for troops invading Afghanistan. Over time, this led to the development of a massive stockpile of rockets for assault helicopters and other weapons.⁴ Even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of Uzbekistan, these stockpiles stayed within the facility at Kagan in an open setting, allowing them to become weather-affected. With age and exposure to varying temperatures, these munitions became unstable, and since they were not inspected, under surveillance or even marked properly, they could not be separated and neutralized.

According to a publication produced by the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons,⁵ these combined factors can lead to the spontaneous ignition of weapons, and it is inevitable for certain propellant types. Inside a single facility, these spontaneous fires can lead to explosions, eventually igniting other stockpiles in the area. Such explosions have the potential to last longer than a few hours, preventing the fire from being extinguished while causing significant damage to the surrounding area.

Analyzing the Situation

“On the third of August I was actually on the ground, working as [part of the] Pre-Deployment Site Survey, basically so I could assess what I really needed team-wise,” Bolos says. LTC Derber, personnel from the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent and U.S. Department of State, as well as the Uzbekistan Minister of Defense and Uzbekistan South West Regional Commander, accompanied Bolos. After the assessment, Bolos was back in Uzbekistan on 21 August with a shipment of the requested equipment and a team of four U.S. Army



Marked UXO scattered outside of Kagan ASP perimeter.

and Navy EOD Non-Commissioned Officers (two from each branch) to assist him with the training that would follow. Joint Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Training Team’ provided the training to the Uzbeks using the donated equipment. “We were able to accomplish that in seven days; we were able to train 300 of their soldiers with this equipment,” says Bolos.



Land-detector training.

Challenges of Operation

The first shipment of equipment that the U.S. gave the Uzbek military included the requested landmine detectors and underwater detectors but not the bomb suits. Working with a limited budget, Bolos had to use his experience as an EOD Officer to determine what would be most beneficial for the Uzbek soldiers. “They needed personal protective equipment. So besides the fact that bomb suits are [US] \$18,000 and I had \$40,000 to get them what they needed, I wanted

to get them the most that I could that would provide them [with the] most protection [using] the funds that I had.” As a result, the team worked without bomb suits during the training process.



Personal protective training.

The training that Bolos and his team delivered to the group of 300 Uzbek soldiers initially seemed like a huge challenge. In fact, while on the Pre-Deployment site survey, Bolos was not allowed access into the military depot, but relegated to the outside of the perimeter. This restriction made it hard for him to assess the degree of damage caused by the explosion and to find inactive munitions to facilitate the training on the metal detectors. Instead, Bolos and his team tried to find examples of the UXO found near the explosion site. “I was able to capture some of the munitions that were scattered among the outside of the perimeter, so I could tell what they were looking for.” He then asked the Uzbeks to provide samples of the munitions involved in the explosion to allow his team to demonstrate how the detectors would work.

Another challenge the team faced was the language barrier. According to Bolos, he had requested the assistance of a Russian interpreter, which seemed like a good choice considering that Uzbekistan was under Russian and then Soviet control for more than a century, but unfortunately this did not work as well as he expected. “We discovered it’s better to have a person with an Uzbek dialect that speaks Uzbekistani versus Russian because some of the younger generation didn’t understand Russian,” he remarked. “We were fortunate [that] one of our interpreters spoke the Uzbek language. He did the majority of our translations.”

Probably the largest obstacle facing Bolos and his team was one outside of his control: time. This impediment was mostly due to the fact that the visas allowing them to stay in the country expired between 30 August and 1 September. Considering that the team arrived with the equipment on 21 August, their available time frame to fully train more than 300 Uzbek soldiers was just seven days.² As if that weren’t difficult enough, the team also had to find a classroom that could accommodate 30 or more personnel and had electricity for a laptop and proxy, locate an area large enough to construct 10 metal-detector practice field lanes, and identify various-sized fragments of UXO to use as training aides.⁵

Training the Trainer

With that in mind, Bolos formulated a strategy that would keep the training on schedule. “We used a three-pronged approach,” Bolos says. “First, instructions were



Underwater detector training (dual-purpose detector; can be utilized on land as well).

given in the [morning] in a classroom environment teaching them assembly and basic characteristics of the landmine and underwater detectors. Second, we had [each of] them assemble [and] functions-check [the detectors], and [then] sent [them] through a practice walk-through lane with buried, but inert, UXO. Third, we identified the more experienced soldiers and [then] encouraged and allowed them to assist getting their own soldiers properly trained and comfortable with the new equipment we provided". With this "train the trainer" technique and methodology, Bolos and his crew effectively trained all of the Uzbek military personnel by 28 August; a whole day earlier than the of time allotted to them.

This training tactic used by the U.S. Joint EOD Military Training Team not only saved the crew time, but it also greatly benefited the Uzbek soldiers as they were now able to train any new replacements that would come into the unit.² This approach was evident when Bolos returned in November to bring the rest of the equipment, including 20 demining suits as substitutes for the expensive suits the Uzbeks originally requested. When Bolos saw the Uzbek soldiers again, they asked him for a small run-through of all the information they had learned three months earlier. He agreed to observe a training session. "They knew exactly

what needed to be done, how to set up the equipment, how to do the pre-checks, how the equipment worked, how the tone sounds and when you hit a positive tone. That worked out very well," says Bolos.

Conclusion

Bolos was also impressed by the level of professionalism the Uzbek personnel showed. "They formed a specialized engineer staffer battalion for this," he says. "They were all engineers. They were familiar with some of the equipment and they [were] very professional. [They learned quickly.] It was very easy working with them."

Ultimately, Bolos and his team had a considerable impact on the Uzbek soldiers. Through training military personnel how to perform EOD operations, the U.S. has provided Uzbekistan with a sustainable method for the teaching and removal of dangerous UXO.

Since his last trip to Central Asia, Bolos has accepted a new assignment at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, assuming command of an EOD Battalion, but he still has fond memories of his trips to the area. "They took care of us," Bolos says. "We were afforded the opportunity to experience their culture and history during our stay." ♦

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Matthew Voegel was an Editorial Assistant for *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* from October 2006 until May 2009. He graduated from James Madison University in May 2009 with a Bachelor of Arts in print journalism and minors in both Spanish and Middle Eastern communities and migrations.

Matthew Voegel
Editorial Assistant
The Journal of ERW and Mine Action
Mine Action Information Center
Center for International
Stabilization and Recovery
James Madison University
E-mail: maic@jmu.edu

Gary Bolos
LTC, LG (EOD)
Commanding
184th EOD BN
7523 Headquarters Loop Road
Fort Campbell, KY 42223 / USA
Tel: 1 270 412 3545
Fax: 1 270 412 3530
E-mail: Gary.Bolos@us.army.mil