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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 Vose [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

O n 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. USAWCENT 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.1 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.2

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 surrounding area. The Department of State, in conjunction with its embassies in Uzbekistan, contacted the U.S. Department of Defense to assist with providing requisite training on the equipment for Uzbek military personnel.3

In addition to the equipment, USAWCENT 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, a serviceman of 23 years and an Army EOD Officer since 1985. Lieut. Col. Bolos led a team of Explosive Ordnance Disposal Non-Commissioned Officers from the 418th Ordnance Company, 80th Ordnance Battalion, 4th Ordnance Group, 1st Ordnance Division. After the assessment, Bolos was not allowed access into the military depot, but relegated to the outside periphery, so I could see what they were looking for.
given in the (momentary) change of environment teaching them assembly and basic characteristics of the landmine and underwater detector operation. Second, we had asked them assembly of their equipment and they were very professional. They seemed quick. It was very easy working "in the unit."

Ultimately, Bolos and his team had a considerable impact on the Uzbek soldiers. Through training military personnel how to perform EDQ operations, the U.S. has provided Uzbekistan with a sustainable method for clearing landmines and 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 time there.

"We learned quickly," Bolos says. "We were afforded the opportunity to experience their culture and history during our stay."