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Cluster Munitions Monitoring and Information Campaign in Azerbaijan

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Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines

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Cluster-munitions Monitoring and Information Campaign in Azerbaijan

This article describes the initiatives undertaken by the Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines to confront the threat of cluster munitions in the country. Since the publication of its report in January of 2008, AzCBL has continued to lobby the government of Azerbaijan to ban the use of cluster munitions.

by Hafiz Safikhanirov [Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines]

Azerbaijan is among the 50 countries in the world affected by cluster munitions, still haunted by the legacy of a war that ended over a decade ago. Between 1992 and 1994, armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia led to the use of cluster munitions against military and civilian targets in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Cluster munitions (or cluster bombs) are military weapons used to disperse numerous smaller submunitions over large areas. Due to the high failure rates of submunitions, many do not detonate on impact and pose a serious threat to civilians long after the fighting has ceased. Although there are many unknowns associated with cluster munitions in Azerbaijan, the scope of unexploded-ordnance contamination in Nagorno-Karabakh is massive. A survey conducted by The HALO Trust in 2007 confirmed 362 areas where cluster submunitions have yet to be physically cleared. The number is expected to increase by an additional 150 areas as surveying continues. In 2007 alone, HALO cleared over 6,100 submunitions in Nagorno-Karabakh and faces the daunting task of clearing countless thousands more in the future.

The stark reality of cluster submunition contamination in Azerbaijan is a broad-reaching humanitarian impact. As of April 2007, there were 13 reported casualties in Azerbaijan due to submunitions. One of the most widely disseminated submunitions in Azerbaijan is the SMOAB-0.5, a small, anti-personnel fragmentation explosive. Found in fields, forests and urban areas alike, children are easily tempted to pick up and play with this ball-shaped submunition, along with its egg-shaped cousin, and are easily killed or incapacitated. The threat of cluster munitions in Azerbaijan is massive. A survey conducted by The HALO Trust in 2007 confirmed 362 areas where cluster submunitions have yet to be physically cleared. The number is expected to increase by an additional 150 areas as surveying continues. In 2007 alone, HALO cleared over 6,100 submunitions in Nagorno-Karabakh and faces the daunting task of clearing countless thousands more in the future.

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AzCBL recognizes that Azerbaijan cannot afford to sit still or remain ignorant of the issue of cluster munitions. After the past five years, the Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) has failed to address the issue of cluster munitions in any tangible way. Consequently, the Oslo Process was started in February 2007 as a mechanism to formulate an international treaty that bans the production, stockpiling and use of cluster munitions. The official line of argument that has been adopted by the government of Azerbaijan is that Azerbaijan, as a stockholder of cluster munitions, cannot accede to any such treaty banning cluster munitions as long as the prospect of renewed armed conflict with Armenia remains a possibility. It is AzCBL’s goal to increase public awareness on the dangers of cluster munitions within Azerbaijan while continuing to press the government to change its stance on signing the Convention on Cluster Munitions. It strongly believes that the political and humanitarian benefits of participating in the Oslo Process far outweigh the limited military utility of a weapon that indiscriminately kills civilians and threatens future generations of Azeris.

Regional Workshop on Cluster Munitions

On 23 August 2007, representatives from eight countries in the region met in the Azerbaijan’s capital for an International Campaign to Ban Landmines workshop concerning cluster munitions. Campaigners and researchers from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Ukraine gathered with representatives from ICBL and the Norwegian Embassy in Baku to raise awareness on the topic and articulate the need to advance the goals of the Oslo Process. In total, 23 organizations attended the workshop, including representatives from human-rights organizations, war-victims associations, war-veterans groups, fellow anti-landmine campaigns and ANAMA.

Field Visits and Monitoring Missions

In September 2007, AzCBL mounted its first data-collection mission in Azerbaijan’s rural regions of Fuzuli, Tartar and Tartov, meeting with several experts from military backgrounds. Information collected proved extremely promising and has yielded places, dates/times and victim contacts that confirm cluster munitions contamination in the surveyed regions.

The findings of AzCBL’s regional monitoring missions and interviews with victims and military experts within the region offer new insight into Azerbaijan’s cluster-munitions problem. The resulting data has yielded concrete information for follow up. In total, AzCBL has confirmed nine deaths as a result of cluster munitions and 41 cluster-munitions victims currently living in the surveyed regions.
Media Outreach

Press conferences. After completing an extensive schedule of meetings, AzCBL and ICBL held a joint press conference on 28 August 2007. The press conference was designed to disseminate information pertaining to AzCBL’s activities and to include information about the proposed new threat of cluster munitions in Azerbaijan. The purpose of the press conference was to inform all relevant contacts.

Distribution of AzCBL information bulletins. The AzCBL produced and distributed an electronic newsletter bulletin in October 2007, covering the course of the project from August up to that point. A second information bulletin was distributed at the end of January 2008. These bulletins carry information about the work and activities of the AzCBL, important incidents or events related to the country’s landmine situation, and current mine-related statistics. Bulletins are an important means of promoting the mine-ban movement in Azerbaijan. They are also an excellent tool for promoting coordination and transparency among organizations and structures affected by or working on the landmine issue.

Distribution of leaflets. AzCBL has created a brochure outlining the nature of the cluster-munitions problem in Azerbaijan, the purpose and activities of the organization in addressing this problem, and the need for Azerbaijan’s accession to the Oslo Process and the Ottawa Convention.

Meetings for Information Sharing and Lobbying

In addition to its lobbying for a cluster-munitions ban, AzCBL held numerous meetings throughout the year as the primary means of advocacy and information-sharing on the landmine issue. AzCBL also learned about other organizations doing work related to the landmine issue and advocated for the Mine Ban Treaty by encouraging other parties to act in accordance with its principles and work towards Azerbaijan’s accession.

Bulgaria and States Affected by Cluster Munitions

AzCBL sent two staff members to participate at the Belgrade Conference of States Affected by Cluster Munitions. From 2-4 October 2007, delegations from 82 countries gathered for an international conference concerning the problem of cluster munitions in states affected by this weapon.

Delegations from affected states discussed their hopes and concerns regarding the creation of a future treaty banning cluster munitions, while member organizations of the Cluster Munitions Coalition met to strategize and discuss the progress made in their respective campaigns. Although AzCBL considers the conference a success in many ways, the government of Azerbaijan refrained from making a statement of support for the Oslo Process, and its participation in future conferences has not been assured.

Vienna Conference to Ban Cluster Munitions. The Vienna Conference to Ban Cluster Munitions was held 4-7 December 2007. The conference was a great success, with 138 states deliberating over a future treaty on ban cluster munitions. AzCBL met several times with the government delegation from Azerbaijan to continue its message that in order to redress the over 170,000 Azerbaijanis killed or wounded, the government of Azerbaijan has a comprehensive ban on cluster munitions.

Project Outcomes

Since the inception of its latest project, AzCBL has made considerable strides toward its goal. Preliminary regional data concerning cluster-munitions survivors and contamination has been collected for the Azerbaijan region’s identification of landmine and cluster-munition survivors. The data reveals a major gap between donors and humanitarian organizations, with limited resources, to engage in cluster-munitions victim assistance more effectively.

In addition, AzCBL should continue to stimulate and transport cluster munitions awareness by any regular distribution of information to relevant contacts, including those within the Azerbaijani government. Continued campaign will be vital to maintaining Azerbaijan’s participation in future Oslo Process meetings, with the eventual aim of having Azerbaijan sign a comprehensive ban on cluster munitions.

Conclusion

This project represents the first major attempt to tackle the problem of cluster munitions in Azerbaijan. The research carried out by AzCBL sheds fresh light on the situation within the country and has empirically clarified evidence that had previously been either uninvestigated or anecdotal.

It is also encouraging to note that Azerbaijan has taken positive steps toward the Oslo Process by attending meetings in Belgrade, Brussels, and Vienna. While these are encouraging steps toward solving the country’s cluster-munitions problem, many more remain to be taken in order to ensure that these weapons will never again plague the lives and livelihoods of future generations of Azerbaijanis.

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Israel Accused of Using Illegal Weapons in Gaza

Human rights groups—notably Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch—have condemned Israel’s alleged use of white phosphorus munitions in Gaza. The organizations have decided the decision to use these weapons in highly populated areas as war crimes and contravenes international law. The Israeli military has denied the use of white phosphorous during its military campaign against Hamas in late 2008/early 2009, and has stated that all weapons used in its three-week offensive were accepted and congruent with international law.

While phosphorus is a highly incendiary chemical used in military operations as a smoke screen to cover troop movement in a specific area. The chemical can also be used as an indiscriminate weapon, as the agent causes severe burns when it comes into contact with skin. It is known to cause serious respiratory problems. A shell can hold more than 100 incendiary bomblets that can contaminate an area 100 meters in diameter. The intent of using white phosphorous as a weapon, instead of as an obscuring agent, is banned by the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

Even though Israel is not a signatory to the Convention, official military manuals for Israeli personnel, which outline the proper conduct in military operations, uphold the restrictions on the use of white phosphorous.

Hafiz Safikhanov is the Director and one of the original founders of the AzCBL. He has been the head researcher of the Azerbaijan country report for the Landmine Monitor Report from 1999 to 2007 and has participated in all annual meetings of States Parties to the Ottawa Convention. Safikhanov is a former military officer from the local region of Azerbaijan. Since the occupation of Kirov in 1993, he has been displaced from his home. He also heads the Azerbaijan Committee of the International Humanitarian Movement “Refugees Against Landmines.”

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