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 Safikhanov | 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 destroyed; that number will increase by an additional 150 areas as surveying continues. In 2007 alone, HALO cleared over 6,500 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 nowhere 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 SKMAB 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 cousins, the AO 2.5. As a result, the majority of recorded casualties have been children. Cluster submunition victims require significant medical care and psychological and social rehabilitation. Their injuries result in significant economic losses to the individuals, their families and the country as a whole. Even after armed conflict has ended, unexploded cluster munitions act as a weapon of area-denial against innocent civilians by limiting mobility and negating the use of otherwise productive land for economic subsistence.

Many details regarding the past use of cluster munitions in Azerbaijan remain unknown. The government of Azerbaijan maintains that it did not use cluster bombs during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict despite reports to the contrary, and thereby is unable/unwilling to provide any empirical data about the quantity and locations of past cluster munitions use. Additionally, as much of the territory around Nagorno-Karabakh remains occupied by the Armenian Armed Forces, many areas that are suspected of being contaminated with UXO remain uninvestigated. For survey. Despite official denials by the Azerbaijan government concerning the existence of cluster munitions in Azerbaijan’s territory, recent work by the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action in the area of Sadchalo has indicated the exact opposite. The Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines is now in the process of surveying the regions of Fuzuli, Terter and Torov to gather essential data on the size and scope of the humanitarian impact posed by cluster munitions. It is the goal of AzCBL to eliminate some of the unknowns concerning this dangerous weapon in Azerbaijan and provide a timely, reliable and independent body of data on this subject.

AzCBL recognizes that Azerbaijan cannot afford to sit still or remain ignorant on the topic of cluster munitions. Over the past five years, the Convention on Conventional Weapons 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 signatory 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.

The two-day conference in Baku began with a series of presentations and a roundtable forum to engage and educate members of Azerbaijan’s civil society and AzCBL’s local coordinators. Lively discussions and active question periods gave the opportunity to discuss different countries’ situations. ANAMA’s representatives, however, expressed their opinion that cluster munitions were not a problem in Azerbaijan, were not present in Azerbaijan and had not been used within the territory of Azerbaijan in the past. By the conclusion of the workshop there was promise in pursuing the issue of cluster munitions within the region, and cooperation and education will play an integral role in the advocacy of the Oslo Process despite ANAMA’s position.

Field Visits and Monitoring Missions

In September 2007, AzCBL mounted its first data-collection mission in Azerbaijan’s rural regions of Fuzuli, Terter and Torov, 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.

Table 1: Specifics locations within each district have been identified as areas where cluster munitions strikes occurred in the past.

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<th>Locations within Districts of Azerbaijan that have dealt with Cluster-munitions Strikes in the Past</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fizuli District</strong></td>
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<td>The Town of Fizuli</td>
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<td>Yukhari Qahvand</td>
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<td>Yukhari Dilghanda</td>
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Figure 1: Locations of cluster munition contamination. General courtesy of the author.
AzCBL took the opportunity to lobby delegates participating in the 8MSP. Furthermore, AzCBL took part in ICBL training on information dissemination to all government 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 to ban cluster munitions. AzCBL met several times with the government delegation from Azerbaijan to continue its message that in order to rid Azerbaijan once and for all of cluster munitions, it is necessary for the government to commit itself to future participation in the Oslo Process and to accede to the 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-munition survivors and contamination has been collected for the Azerbaijan region. The AzCBL is currently working with the government of Azerbaijan to begin the process of victim assistance and reintegration of cluster-munitions survivors in areas where cluster munitions have been found. Further research is needed to map the extent of the problem and develop a comprehensive cluster-munitions database covering Azerbaijan.

In addition, AzCBL has created a brochure outlining the nature of the cluster-munitions problem in Azerbaijan, the purposes and activities of the organization in addressing this problem, and the need for Azerbaijan’s accession to the Oslo Process and the Ottawa Convention. This brochure is distributed to all governmental representatives with whom the AzCBL interacts, at regular distribution of information to relevant contacts, including those within the Azerbaijani government. Continued campaigning 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.

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Conclusion

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

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-munition problem, more remain to be taken in order to ensure that these weapons will never again threaten the lives and livelihoods of future generations of Azerbaijani civilians.

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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. These organizations have deemed the decision to use these weapons in heavily populated areas as war crimes and contravenes international law. The Israeli military has denied the use of white phosphorus 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.

White phosphorus is a highly incendiary chemical used in military operations as a smoke screen to cover troop movement and signaling purposes. The use of white phosphorus is prohibited under international law. The Israeli military has denied the use of white phosphorus 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.

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