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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 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 cleared, and experts believe this number will 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 indeed 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 SNOAB 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, the AO 2.5. As a result, the majority of recorded casualties are children. Cluster submunitions victims require significant medical care and physical, 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 in sabre/unnawling 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 unavailable 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 Shaki has indicated the exact opposite. The Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines is now in the process of surveying the regions of Fizuli, Tartar and Tovuz 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.

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

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<tr>
<th>Locations within Districts of Azerbaijan that have dealt with Cluster-munitions Strikes in the Past</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fizuli District</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Town of Fizuli</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yukhari Yaghvend</td>
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<td>Yukhari Dilgharda</td>
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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 stockpiler 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 some 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 Fizuli, Tartar and Torov, meeting with several experts from military backgrounds. Information collected proved extremely promising and has yielded places, dates/times and victim contacts that conform 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-munition 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.
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.

Recommendations

Given the information that AzCBL has collected concerning cluster munitions, it proposes a few steps. The first is to create and develop a reliable and comprehensive database of cluster-munitions survivers within Azerbaijan. Having such a database would enable government authorities, donors and humanitarian organizations, with limited resources, to engage in cluster-munitions victim assistance more effectively.

In addition, AzCBL should continue to be open and transparent about cluster munitions and should develop an active and comprehensive ban on cluster munitions.

Azerbaijan has taken positive steps toward the Oslo Process by attending meetings in Belgrade, Brussels and Vienna. While these efforts are stepping toward solving the country’s cluster-munitions problem, more remain to be taken in order to ensure that these weapons will never again pollute the lives and livelihoods of future generations of Azerbaijani citizens.

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 that 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 efforts are stepping toward solving the country’s cluster-munitions problem, more remain to be taken in order to ensure that these weapons will never again pollute the lives and livelihoods of future generations of Azerbaijani citizens.