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Azerbaijan Mine Victim Association: The Story So Far

Due to years of conflict, Azerbaijan has become yet another territory contaminated with dangerous landmines and unexploded ordnance; however, the Azerbaijan Mine Victim Association, a nongovernmental organization that started in the Terter region of Azerbaijan, has been working hard to help mine victims. The organization, a product of the International Eurasia Press Fund, has received international recognition from organizations such as the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and is continuing to provide mine-risk education and support for survivors and their families.

by Nick Nwolisa [International Eurasia Press Fund]

The Azerbaijan Mine Victim Association is the brain-child of the International Eurasia Press Fund, a national nongovernmental organization; it was created to give mine victims a sense of belonging in society. Such an organization was needed because, in the past, mine victims in Azerbaijan have suffered their fates in silence, as if their injuries and lives were the consequences of their own actions.

In 2006, the IEPF established the AMVA in the Terter district of Azerbaijan to help landmine victims improve their lives. The project was designed to create a basis of support for mine victims. To achieve this goal, the IEPF has implemented a range of supportive programs including legal assistance, health assistance, mine-risk education, vocational training, micro-financing and similar activities.

The project was deemed successful and the resulting activity acclaimed by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) in 2006. The IEPF was invited to ECOSOC's July 2007 exhibition which focused on poverty reduction as a measure of achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.¹

Regional Background

The Nagorno-Karabakh War, the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, resulted in the displacement of approximately one million people.² Before the war, the primary occupation of people from this area was a variety of agriculture and animal husbandry as Nagorno-Karabakh's soil is very rich in mineral nutrients. Due to the landmine and unexploded ordnance contamination, however, much of the land cannot be farmed until it is cleared of landmines/UXO. In a Landmine Impact Survey conducted from 2002 to 2003, the IEPF discovered that 26 districts of the non-occupied area of Azerbaijan were contaminated with landmines/UXO; in addition, approximately 643 communities were categorized as "impacted" areas.³ Besides putting farmers and herders in jeopardy, this contamination is severely affecting other aspects of these people's lives.



Meeting with the mine victims to identify their problems.
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Beyond landmine and UXO risks, war causes physical, psychological and social damage to individuals and communities. This damage may involve loss of loved ones, not to mention the abrupt and horrific individual physical changes civilians face due to incidents involving landmines and UXO. Many people are left disabled, homeless and without livelihoods. According to the 2007 *Landmine Monitor Report*, there were



Mine victims practice simple medical skills.

17 mine/UXO-related casualties reported in 2006 by the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action, two of which resulted in death.⁴

According to the International Mine Action Standards,⁵ the definition of a mine victim is broader than a person who suffers harm as a result of a landmine or UXO incident. It also encompasses the social and psychological effects on the survivor, his or her family and the community.

What the AMVA is Doing

Mine victims in Azerbaijan are scattered throughout the country. They predominantly reside in the regions of Agstafa, Fizuli and Terter, with the greatest number of mine victims found in the Terter region, according to information from ANAMA's 2002–2003 Landmine Impact Survey.

Since 1999, the government of Azerbaijan—through the continuous and dedicated work of ANAMA, IEPF and Relief Azerbaijan—has been carrying out activities in the Terter region and various other regions where mines are known to be emplaced. In 2004, the IEPF and ANAMA implemented the “Mine Victims Needs Assessment” in the Terter region. The outcome of the project spurred the IEPF to establish the mine-victim association in Azerbaijan. The financial support of the Office Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of

Political-Military Affairs helped to facilitate this project.

Recognizing a need for continuity in mine-victim associations, the Agstafa and Fizuli branches of the AMVA were established with support from PM/WRA. The establishment of the Terter branch of the Azerbaijan Mine Victim Association facilitated the next stage of outreach: bringing together mine victims throughout Azerbaijan.

In May 2007, the IEPF implemented the project to create the Agstafa and Fizuli branches of the AMVA, while also directing the Terter branch. The IEPF coordinated the activities of these projects through its regional offices in Agstafa, Fizuli and Terter. One of the greatest achievements of the earliest project, “Establishing and Functioning of the Mine Victims Association in the Terter District of Azerbaijan,” is that the bulk of the participants in the association became board members and helped establish AMVA branches in Agstafa and Fizuli. The International Eurasia Press Fund achieved this milestone through the tireless efforts of its chairman, Umud Mirzeyev, and staff members in its Baku headquarters and regional offices.

Through continuous training and retraining, the mine victims are virtually taking over the direction of these activities. For example, Zabil Mamadov, a group II invalid,⁶ is in charge of legal matters. Although not a legal

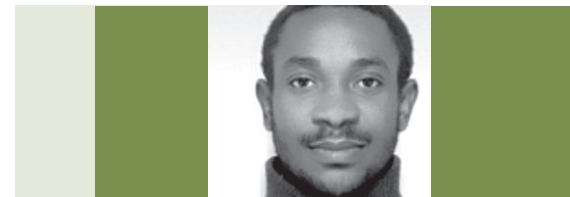
expert himself, he has gathered quite a bit of experience in the legal field. He is aided by Khalisa Shahverdiyeva, the legal adviser of IEPF. Bakhshesh Hatamli, a group II invalid, is in charge of business training; he is currently chairman of the AMVA. Baxsheshly is aided by Rahman Mammadov, Programs Department Head of the IEPF. Suleymanov Elshan, a group II invalid, serves as co-coordinator of the activities in the Agstafa branch. He is aided by Siyab Mammadov, the Head of Department for IEPF.

Future of the AMVA

The AMVA sees its achievements as a small part of the process that helps survivors learn to advocate for themselves. It provides a new lease on life for the mine victims: jobs are being created in the fields of agriculture, carpet weaving and small business enterprises, and survivors are receiving direct employment, especially with IEPF activities.

The AMVA is registered with the Ministry of Justice of Azerbaijan. In the near future, in collaboration with the IEPF, the AMVA hopes to establish a Baku branch, which will serve as the national headquarters for the AMVA. This branch will help further the solidification of the AMVA. For the AMVA, the future is very bright indeed. ♦

See Endnotes, page 111



Nick Nwolisa was born in Kaduna, Nigeria. He was educated in Nigeria, where he studied biochemistry at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka. He worked briefly with the Departments of Safety, Health and Environmental Affairs of Exxon Mobil in Nigeria. Presently, he is in charge of refugee/IDP problems and community development at IEPF.

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