

Albania

by Kateland Shane [Mine Action Information Center]

For many citizens of Albania the current mine problem is a haunting reminder of the Kosovo Crisis of 1999. Upon returning home after an evacuation of the Albania-Kosovo border area, residents discovered the border polluted with mines and unexploded ordnance.

The Landmine/UXO Problem

The threat now facing Albania stems from anti-personnel and anti-tank mines laid by forces of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia as well as from UXO released from NATO cluster strikes during Operation Allied Force. There is also an abandoned explosive ordnance problem resulting from looting during internal civil unrest in 1997.¹ Affected areas of Albania include 39 villages located in the districts of Kukes, Has and Tropoja.² After the Kosovo Crisis ended, the Albania Armed Forces' Level One Survey concluded there were about 102 areas or 15.3 square kilometers (5.9 square miles) of mine-affected land along the border of Albania.³

The mine threat presents an obstacle to Albania's potential for development. Restricted access to valuable farming land has had a negative impact on the local economy of the border areas, which rely heavily on agriculture. Contaminated areas have blocked passage to some drinking water sources and prevented land development for ecotourism. The contamination problem has also slowed law-enforcement response to incidents of crime and human trafficking along the Albanian/Kosovo border. Since 1999, 13 police officers have suffered casualties while patrolling the mine-affected borders.³ From 1999 to 2005, 272 mine/UXO-related casualties have occurred in Albania with 34 resulting in death.² There were no casualties reported in 2006.⁴

Today, Albania no longer produces anti-personnel landmines. On 8 September 1998, the Republic of Albania signed the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention⁵ and ratified it on 29 February 2000. Destruction of APM stockpiles began on 15 January 2001 and ended on 4 April 2002, two years before the specified Ottawa deadline.¹ Albania is also a party to Amended Protocol II and has consented to Protocol V of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.⁶

Institutional Development for Mine Action

The Albanian Government established the inter-ministerial Albanian Mine Action Committee in October 1999 as the policy-

making and supervisory body for mine action. The Albanian Mine Action Executive was established to carry out, coordinate, and monitor the mine action program under direction of the AMAC.⁷

Albanian MA Completion Plan, 2006–2010

The Albanian Mine Action Plan for Completion is a five-year plan developed by the Albanian Mine Action Executive. The overall goal of the Mine Action Completion Plan is to clear all suspected hazardous areas and release all contaminated land back to the community by 2010. At that time, all mine-clearance operations in Albania will come to a close. In addition, the AMAE hopes to maintain mine casualties to zero and build its capabilities in survivor assistance.⁸

Mine Clearance

Major challenges in mine action lie in the area of clearance; there is currently only one demining organization in the country and the working season is only from April to November. DanChurchAid is currently the sole demining organization conducting clearance activities under the supervision of AMAE.² RONCO Consulting Corporation, the German nongovernmental organization HELP International and Fondation Suisse de Déminage are other organizations that have previously conducted clearance operations in Albania. At the end of 2006, the AMAE reported that 1,360,853 square meters (336 acres) were cleared and released to the community that year, leaving only 2.1 million square meters (518 acres) of land contaminated with mines and UXO.⁴ The Albanian Completion Plan aims to clear the remaining land in 2007–2009 with the support of donors and a minimum of six manual-clearance teams, assuming current funding levels continue.⁴

Victim Assistance

As part of a 2004 United Nations Development Programme victim-assistance project, a community-based rehabilitation network with a staff of 30 nurses has been developed for emergency mine/UXO victim treatment.¹ Amputees in Albania are able to receive prostheses from the National Prosthetic Centre in Tirana and the Slovenia Institute for Rehabilitation. In mid-2006, Handicap International also became involved in victim assistance in Albania, providing training and support for local health workers. The Victims of Mines Association, a local

NGO, also administers a revolving loan fund for a pilot project assisting mine survivors in becoming socioeconomically independent through home-based business training.⁸

Mine-risk Education

In the area of MRE, organizations such as the VMA and the Albanian Red Cross will continue to provide MRE in the 39 affected communities. MRE activities such as concerts, competitions and plays are being delivered in affected communities to familiarize citizens with the risks of mines and UXO. An MRE curriculum has already been integrated into mine-affected community classrooms, with the goal of being fully incorporated into Albania's national educational system by 2009.⁸

A Hopeful Future

Thirteen of the original 15.3 million square meters (3,781 square miles) of affected land have already been cleared according to national mine-action standards, thanks to organizations such as RONCO, HELP, Fondation Suisse de Déminage, DanChurchAid⁹ and with the financial support of the international community and Albanian government. Last year the number of mine casualties dropped from 152 in 1999 to only two incidents in 2005,¹ and zero incidents reported in 2006,⁴ a trend the country hopes to continue with the nationwide implementation of its MRE curriculum and continued clearance efforts.



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