

# Armenia

by Joseph Keane [ Mine Action Information Center ]

Armenia has been gaining strength since recovering from the 1988 Spitak earthquake, the collapse of the Soviet government and Turkey's trade embargo. The country experienced economic depression in the 1990s<sup>1</sup> but the government turned the economy around, creating positive growth rates from 1995 to 2006.<sup>1</sup> As a member of 35 international organizations, Armenia is moving out of the post-Soviet era and onto the international stage. Part of becoming a modern nation is removing all possible threats to development. Landmines and unexploded ordnance are a threat to every aspect of development in Armenia.

## Current Landmine Situation

The majority of Armenia's landmines and UXO are a result of the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict (1988–1994) over the Nagorno-Karabakh region in southwest Azerbaijan. Following the ceasefire, the Armenian Army surveyed the border where most landmines were placed and estimated that there were from 50,000 to 80,000 active landmines.<sup>2</sup> The two countries have not signed a peace treaty and Armenia reports security issues to be the reason the country has not signed the Ottawa Convention.<sup>2</sup>

In 2005 a Landmine Impact Survey was conducted in Armenia. It did not include areas under the control of Armenia that are considered part of Azerbaijan, such as Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations Development Programme, the European Commission and the Armenian government financed the LIS. It concluded that there were 102 suspected hazardous areas that covered a combined 321.7 square kilometers (124.3 square miles), including 20 "UXO hotspots."<sup>3</sup> Sixty communities with a total population of 68,737 live close enough to the 102 sites to be directly affected.<sup>4</sup> The Ministry of Defense has claimed it marked all known minefields with barbed wire and warning signs; however, the LIS found that only five of the 60 impacted communities had any blocked off areas.<sup>3</sup> There were five people injured by landmines and UXO in 2005; no reports have been made since.<sup>3</sup>

Armenia has supported the banning of anti-personnel landmines at the annual U.N. General Assembly meeting by voting in favor of the universalization and full implementation of the Ottawa Convention.<sup>3</sup> Armenia is not a member of the Ottawa Convention nor the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons<sup>5</sup> but volunteered to submit a re-

port to the U.N. Secretary-General on the status of landmines in 2005, which, according to the United Nations Disarmament and Development Web site, is the last time Armenia submitted such a report.<sup>7</sup>

The Armenian Ministry of Defense, the Armenian Humanitarian Demining Centre and the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure Coordination have recently completed a three-year plan to coordinate and implement a demining program.<sup>4</sup> The goals of 2006 were "conducting a Technical Survey, Marking and Clearance (one community, as a pilot project); conducting a public awareness campaign and mine-risk education in mine-affected areas; conducting targeted victim assistance in mine-affected areas; supporting the Armenian Humanitarian Demining Centre; and assisting the government of Armenia in drafting a national mine action strategy and legislation."<sup>4</sup>

Armenia faces a number of challenges in demining. Weather permits landmine clearance for only six months per year, from May to October.<sup>3</sup> Of the three 18-person teams, only two are active in Armenia; the third is currently working in Iraq.<sup>3</sup> In October 2005 the Inter-Agency Governmental Committee on Mine Action researched the leading factors for the lack of mine action. The committee concluded that "limited national expertise and funding" were the main obstacles to a national mine-action strategy.<sup>6</sup> These are contributing factors, according to the Ministry of Defense, for less than one square kilometer having been cleared since 2003.<sup>3</sup>

## Mine-action Organizations in Armenia

The Armenian Humanitarian Demining Centre was created in March 2002 through funding and training from the United States Departments of State and Defense.<sup>7</sup> The Centre is a part of the Armenian Ministry of Defense and is in charge of mine action in Armenia. UNDP-Armenia, as the driving force behind much of Armenia's mine action, works in coordination with the national government and humanitarian organizations to achieve a "safer, more efficient, and effective implementation of mine-action components."<sup>4</sup> The Inter-Agency Governmental Committee on Mine Action is in the process of becoming the managing body of all branches of mine action in Armenia. The UNDP has appealed for funds that will strengthen the organization's ability to function effectively.<sup>8</sup>

Other organizations working on mine action in Armenia include the Marshall Legacy Institute, which introduced the Mine Detecting Dog Partnership Program in Armenia in 2002 to use handlers and professional dogs capable of "sniffing out" the explosives in landmines and UXO.<sup>9</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross helps the UNDP with victim assistance, mainly finding artificial limbs for landmine survivors, helping support healthcare and creating safe play areas for children.<sup>10</sup> The Armenian Red Cross and UNICEF work with the UNDP to promote mine-risk education programs.

## Looking Ahead

Armenia has set out a mine-action strategy for 2006–2011, based on "the assumption that the nature of the mine problem requires more effective risk management through continuous assessment of the situation and effective planning and coordination."<sup>11</sup> A few of the specific goals being accomplished through cooperation with the international organizations listed above include enabling continuous and efficient humanitarian-demining operations; establishing improved capacities for implementing MRE within the education system in Armenia; and working in conjunction with local and international research and development centers to create conditions for more effective mine action.<sup>11</sup> ♦

*See Endnotes, Page*



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