

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 11
Issue 1 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 35

July 2007

Azerbaijan

Country Profile

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Recommended Citation

Profile, Country (2007) "Azerbaijan," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 35.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol11/iss1/35>

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Azerbaijan

by Kateland Shane [Mine Action Information Center]

From 1988 to 1994, Azerbaijan was engaged in an armed conflict with its neighbor Armenia and armed forces of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. A ceasefire was negotiated in 1994, but a peace agreement is still underway. During the conflict, both sides used landmines. Forces from both Armenia and the self-declared Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh currently occupy about 20 percent of land within Azerbaijan, making demining difficult in those areas.¹

The Landmine/UXO Threat

The 2002–2003 Azerbaijan Landmine Impact Survey conducted in accessible territories identified an extensive mine and unexploded ordnance problem with a reported 970 suspected hazard areas and heavy contamination along the ceasefire line and the border of Armenia. The survey recognized a total of 18 affected districts. The extent of the threat in the occupied territories is unknown, although the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action estimates the amount of contaminated land could be anywhere between 350 and 830 million square meters (135 to 320 square miles).² The types of mines found in Azerbaijan include not only anti-personnel and anti-tank mines but also homemade mines and field-charges.³

In addition to mines, remains from the abandoned Soviet depots and stockpiles are scattered all over the country. One of the most serious contaminations involves a massive Soviet-military ammunition storehouse destroyed in the Agstafa region that resulted in the contamination of 44 million square meters (17 square miles) of land. Following its destruction there have been 152 UXO-related accidents reported in Agstafa, mostly in the Saloglu village, where the explosion took place.⁴

Although the exact number of mine/UXO victims in Azerbaijan is unknown, there are believed to be over 3,000 victims. Of the victims, over 200 were children and 1,300 are believed to have died. In 2005, mine/UXO casualties were at a 10-year high in Azerbaijan.³

The Ottawa Process

While the Republic of Azerbaijan contends it cannot become a signatory of the Ottawa Convention⁵ until the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has been resolved, it has shown support for many terms of the Convention.⁶ Azerbaijan states that it is already satisfying some conditions of the

Convention because it does not produce or transfer anti-personnel mines and it actively participates in mine-clearance and mine-victim-assistance activities. Azerbaijan also is not party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.⁷

Azerbaijan National Mine Action Strategic Plan (2005–2008)

Although Azerbaijan has not signed the Ottawa Convention, ANAMA has developed a National Strategic Plan based on the 2003 Landmine Impact Survey to help meet clearance objectives within the timeframe of the Convention. This includes both short- and long-term strategic plans for mine action in Azerbaijan in the areas of clearance, mine-risk education and victim assistance.⁸

Mine Clearance

At the end of April 2007, ANAMA reported that about 47.9 million square meters (18.1 square miles) of accessible land had been reduced or cleared of landmines and 216,845 explosive items had been destroyed. ANAMA plans to clear about 15 million square meters (5.7 square miles) of land in 2008.⁴ As part of the National Strategic Plan, all high- and medium-impact land is scheduled to be accessible in Azerbaijan by 2008. In addition, all low-impact areas are to be marked and fenced by 2008.⁸ Local nongovernmental organizations involved in mine clearance include the International Eurasia Press Fund and Dayag (Relief Azerbaijan).⁴

In response to the contamination in Agstafa, ANAMA launched the Saloglu Project jointly with the NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency, a UXO clearance project set to begin its second phase in April 2007.⁴ The project, a NATO Partnership for Peace Trust Fund venture, is set to clear the 5.6 square kilometers (2.1 square miles) of contaminated land around the Saloglu and Poylu villages.⁶

Mine-risk Education

In 2006 mine-risk education in Azerbaijan was circulated within schools and communities. Working with UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, ANAMA implemented an MRE curriculum in about 600 schools in 20 mine-affected districts, including the districts currently under occupation.⁴ International and local nongovernmental organizations are also working to make Azerbaijan safer for the children. In 2006 the Red Crescent Society of Azerbaijan

helped create 10 safe play areas for children in several local communities with the support of the International Committee of the Red Cross in addition to the 15 safe play areas that were created in 2005. In 2007 ICRC reports plans to implement safe play areas in 10 more communities throughout Azerbaijan.⁹

From 22 to 23 February, Azerbaijan was one of 43 nations to participate in a workshop on the NATO Partnership for Peace Trust Fund held in Washington, D.C. Participants in the workshop received information and training on carrying out Trust Fund projects.¹⁰

Victim Assistance

In 2006 there were several mine-victim-assistance projects implemented in Azerbaijan. One of the projects being implemented by the IEPF with the support of the U.S. State Department involves the socio-economic reintegration of local survivors. An initiative group of 10 survivors received training in management, medicine, small business, mine-risk education and computer literacy. An additional 20 mine survivors also volunteered to help with the project, which ended in May 2007. In 2007, with the financial support of the U.S. DOS, the IEPF plans to establish other branches of the Association and ensure their sustainability.¹¹ Following a 2005 needs assessment survey, ANAMA and other NGOs also organized several recent MVA projects in Azerbaijan.¹²

Conclusion

With the presence of such an organized and dedicated mine-action program, the mine and UXO threat in Azerbaijan is slowly disappearing. ANAMA and other organizations are helping to make Azerbaijan safer by ensuring the recovery of survivors and the prevention of future mine and UXO accidents, one project at a time.

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