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Georgia

by Jina Kim [Mine Action Information Center]

Since Georgia claimed independence in 1991 from the former USSR, periods of war and unrest have disrupted the country, particularly within the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. During these conflicts all sides emplaced mines in both regions. Landmines and other explosive remnants of war¹ also remain following the withdrawal of Russian forces after the USSR dissolved.

Landmine/ERW Problem

Although the landmine situation in Georgia is of relatively low impact, and “overall, the mine problem in Georgia, outside of Abkhazia, is not large in scope,”² some renewed mine threats surfaced in 2005 and 2006. On 21 June 2006, Sergei Bagapsh, de-facto President of Abkhazia, “threatened to mine the border with Georgia if Russian peacekeepers were withdrawn from the area,” and in May 2005, military officials said, “There are special units in Abkhazia that are ready to install landmine fields at any moment providing it is necessary for the defense of national security.”³ Although these threats were made, no additional mines were laid and Bagapsh’s de-facto minister continued to allow for demining to take place.⁴

There is also an ongoing conflict between Georgia and its breakaway region of South Ossetia. It has been reported that mines have been laid by both sides in this conflict. At the present time, the security conditions and political climate in South Ossetia are not conducive to mine-action activities.⁴

In Georgia there is also a significant problem of abandoned explosive remnants of war left in firing ranges and former Russian military bases and unexploded ordnance from the 1992–1993 conflict in Abkhazia.³ Additional mined locations are cause for concern as well. The borders between Georgia and Chechnya, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Russian regions of Ingushetia and Daghestan have a record of emplaced mines.⁵

Mine Action

Mine action in Georgia has been unstable due to lack of a formal mine-action program and no single coordinating authority for mine action. Ineffectiveness of mine-action programs is also due to the fact that “land in Georgia has been mined without any registration, mapping, or other records.”⁵ In

May 2006, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs again noted the intention to establish a permanent working group on landmines under the National Security Council, “but due to recent reorganization of the Council, the issue is still open.”²

Another contributory factor to the unorganized mine action-program in Georgia is the country’s refusal to join the Mine Ban Convention.⁶ Georgia states that it is unable to join the Convention because of lack of jurisdiction concerning the civil unrest with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and thus would be unable to fulfill the Convention’s requirements.

The HALO Trust is the biggest mine-action authority in Georgia and is in the final stages of implementing a fully integrated mine-action program in Abkhazia, which will see the territory declared impact free⁷ in 2008. HALO also runs the Abkhaz Mine Action Center, which manages and disseminates all information regarding mine action and victims within the territory.⁴

In response to accidents occurring within the boundaries of abandoned military bases in Georgia, mine-risk education programs were carried out by the ICBL–Georgian Committee, UNICEF and HALO during 2005–2006. However, “given the lack of support HALO received in Georgia, it decided to suspend MRE operations in early 2006.”²

In February 2004, Georgian First Lady Sandra Roelofs requested that HALO conduct an emergency survey of abandoned military bases. Clearance could not occur due to “political reasons and the fact that some of the bases were still used by the Georgian military. In order to minimize the number of accidents occurring in these areas, HALO conducted emergency MRE with the support of the Georgian Ministry of Education.”⁴ This program has since been suspended.⁴

Civilian Implications

The lack of an organized mine-action program in Georgia also makes it difficult for authorities to compile an accurate list of casualties and injuries caused by mines or ERW. The ICBL–Georgian Committee has been collecting data on UXO- and landmine-related accidents and deaths since 2001. In 2005 alone, the Committee collected the data about 31 casualties.⁸ Since 2006 there have been reports by the Georgian press of four mine accidents in South Ossetia and

one new mine accident in Abkhazia.⁴ These statistics may not be entirely accurate due to unreported accidents and lack of an official mine-action organization. In the territory of Abkhazia, HALO keeps an accurate mine/UXO victim database and has recorded the names of 683 mine and UXO victims in the territory as of May 2007.⁴

Future Prospects

It is difficult to predict what will happen in Georgia. It is still in transition and the continued unrest with Abkhazia and South Ossetia affects each party’s willingness to destroy mines. These factors prevent Georgia from being able to join the AP Mine Ban Convention and creating an official organization to demine the country. But there are signs of hope for the country as it tries to resolve its differences with the two territories. Georgia is currently lobbying to join NATO and the European Union,⁹ and thanks to the help of organizations such as HALO and the U.S. Department of State, the territory of Abkhazia will be declared mine-impact free in the near future.⁴

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