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Nazim Ismaylov
Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action

Emil M. Hasanov
Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action

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Explosive Remnants of War and the Reality of Azerbaijan

This article explains the danger of explosive remnants of war when located within communities and the precautions that need to be taken in order to get rid of this problem. It also describes how the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action is trying to address the problem of abandoned ammunition storage in one of the most highly contaminated areas among existing abandoned ammunition storages in the world.

by Nazırım Ismaylov and Emil Hasanov [Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action]

Today, there are still some discussions on the definition of explosive remnants of war, but in general there is an understanding that the problems caused by EWR are both widespread and long-term, and that the number of casualties and deaths caused by both unexploded and abandoned grenades, mortar shells, fuses and cluster bombs is high and equivalent to landmines. The physical and psychological impacts of EWR on a community are significant considering the number of deaths and injuries caused, which can overload often stretched medical infrastructures. EWR also have a wide socioeconomic impact on affected communities in terms of land use and blockages to reconstruction and development activities.

The main points related to the threats caused by EWR are:
- Injuries or deaths can take place at a distance from the explosion.
- Items of unexploded ordnance are generally more powerful (and therefore more lethal) than anti-personnel mines.
- When UXO accidents do not involve deaths, they typically result in severe wounds.
- EWR are generally found on the surface and are therefore much more visible, which can result in more interaction with EWR than mines. Also, UXO can be found in locations where clean-up can be particularly difficult.
- The fear of UXO is generally greater than the fear of mines because UXO can be much more visible and give people a false impression of safety, which can be very dangerous.
- EWR are unpredictable and can detonate at anytime due to a variety of stimuli.

Azerbaijan has not signed the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons or the Ottawa Convention for several reasons, including some political issues with neighbouring countries, particularly the conditions of the war with Armenia. Armenia occupies the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding areas, totalling 20 percent of Azerbaijan. Today there are just under eight million people in Azerbaijan. Of these, 450,000 are internally displaced persons and 500,000 are ethnic Azeris who came to Azerbaijan from Armenia.

Despite the fact that Azerbaijan has not signed the Ottawa Convention, the country is supportive of it according to ‘Azerbaijan and the Ottawa Process.’ This document states, ‘The government of Azerbaijan has supported the idea of having a comprehensive international legal document on prohibition of use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel mines. Our country has learnt the catastrophe that this ammunition can bring. Therefore Azerbaijan advocates eliminating and destruction of mines. Azerbaijan shares all concerns taken into consideration while coming to the statement of the Convention and is involved neither in transfer, transportation, nor in production of anti-personnel mines.’ But continued conflict prevents Azerbaijan from according to the Document.’ The government of Azerbaijan hopes to sign the Ottawa Convention once the conflicts in its territories are resolved.

UXO Operations and Abandoned Ammunition Storage Clearance

History of the problem. A military ammunition warehouse located in Agstafa, consisting of 138 bunkers, was the largest Soviet warehouse in the south Caucasus. Agstafa is located in the northeast part of Azerbaijan, bordering the Karabakh region in the west, Tovuz in the east, the Republic of Georgia in the north and Armenia in the southwest. In 1991, when Azerbaijan regained independence, the warehouse was destroyed by the Soviet Army before it departed. As a result of the explosion, thousands of pieces of UXO were scattered over 44 square kilometres (17 square miles), posing serious humanitarian, socioeconomic and environmental threats to the local population.

Since the explosion, 148 UXO-related accidents have been reported, with 31 people dead and 80 injured. To collect scrap metal from the UXO, people expose themselves to injury and death. Some companies trying to gain profit have been involved in illegally collecting UXO from surrounding areas, devising simple methods involving very unsafe techniques. By selling the metal and non-ferrous parts of the projectiles, both individuals and companies supplement their income. This is the principal cause of many deaths and injuries among the people living near Saloglu, a village in Agstafa. A recent accident involved the death of a young man searching among the unexploded bombs for copper to sell at the local market.

Azerbaijan appealed to NATO for assistance in the clearance of the Saloglu area and the destruction of stockpiled UXO. As an initial step, the NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency conducted a technical assessment of the site and consequently the Partnership for Peace Trust Fund on the Saloglu Project was established. The role of the lead nation in the Saloglu Project was given to Turkey.

On 14 February 2005 all efforts aimed at facilitating the Saloglu Project in Azerbaijan were brought together at the NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. Turkey signed the Financial Management Agreement for the project at a special ceremony involving NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and the representatives of contributing countries.

The total cost of the project is valued at €1,047,649 (approximately US$1.5 million) and is estimated it will last 16 months. Azerbaijan, as a host nation, met all the commitments on the project. With contributions from NATO and individual partner nations—namely Australasia, Finland, Luxembourg, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey
Taking into account that 15 years have passed since the warehouse explosion, clearance of this ammunition is a complicated and extremely important task.

In addition to planned clearance projects such as those mentioned, ANAMA also provides rapid response to mine/UXO-related emergencies. When the Agafa scrap-metal workshop set up by locals exploded approximately 200 meters (219 yards) from a residential area, the workshop itself was totally destroyed and, according to official information by local authorities, three people were killed and 23 injured.

Additionally, the explosion damaged houses as far as three kilometers (two miles) from the workshop. Immediately following the explosion, ANAMA established a team of UXO operators to carry out emergency marking and clearance operations in the incident area. Operations lasted for one month and as a result, 175,000 square meters (42 acres) of land were cleared and more than 5,007 items of UXO (among them 1,261 pieces containing white phosphorus) were removed from the area and destroyed. ANAMA has continued to react quickly to any mine- and UXO-related emergencies.

Conclusion

As the Japanese might say, “Tada yori nai mono wa nai!” (“We have to pay much more for something we got for free!”). It is important to figure out how to solve the existing problem of UXO and abandoned ammunition and how to protect ourselves from ERW in the future. Human beings created the problem—dropping the bombs and abandoning the ammunition “for free” on Azerbaijan—and now they must correct it at great cost by cleaning up the country and making it safe again.

See Endnotes, page 109

Emil M. Hasanov has worked as Operations Manager for the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action since May 2001. From 1989 to 2001 he worked in various positions within the Ministry of Justice. He earned a master’s degree in law and retired from the Ministry as a Captain of Justice. He is the author of various articles related to the human rights, terrorism, small arms/light weapons, firearms, and humanitarian mine action and law.

Emil M. Hasanov, Operations Manager
Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action
E-mail: eminalim@anama.baku.az
Web site: http://www.anama.baku.az

Follwing a conflict, humanitarian organisations are generally the first to enter a country to deliver aid and start to rebuild the country’s infrastructure. Aid workers often rely on a 4x4 sport-utility vehicle to transport supplies and people. This type of carrier is viewed as a big, among vehicle with high mobility; but it offers little protection against landmines and other explosive remnants of war. It is what is known as a “soft vehicle.”

The term ERW is very wide and covers anything from handgun ammunition to aircraft bombs.2 The majority of injuries, however, are caused by devices like anti-personnel landmines, anti-tank mines and, as seen recently in Lebanon, air-dropped submunitions “bomblets.” Apart from being the most numerous, AP mines are directed against people on foot and are normally designed to explode following a relatively small impact—often by the pressure of a foot or the tripping of a mine.

At the same time, small- or large-calibre gun ammunition, aircraft bombs and mortar rounds tend to be more stable—although when they do explode, the results can be much more devastating.

The extent to which AP mines endanger passengers in a soft-skinned SUV depends heavily upon which type of device we’re talking about. We can separate the various devices into two groups depending on their primary kill mechanism:

- Blast ammunition works by creating a powerful blast wave that destroys objects in close proximity to the explosion.
- Fragmenting and submunition works by creating high-velocity steel fragments intended to inflict as much damage as possible to anything or anyone in the surrounding area.

Most AP mines inflict injury primarily through the blast effect and normally detonate by pressure. The effect of the blast wave decreases rapidly with distance and it is often a “one kill” weapon. On the other hand, some AP mines and many types of air-dropped bomblets work with fragmentation as the primary kill mechanism. The same goes for almost all mortar rounds and artillery ammunition. Contrary to a blast wave, which loses its power very quickly, the high-density fragments surrounding the explosives maintain...