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Explosive Remnants of War and the Reality of Azerbaijan

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Explosive Remnants of War and the Reality of Azerbaijan

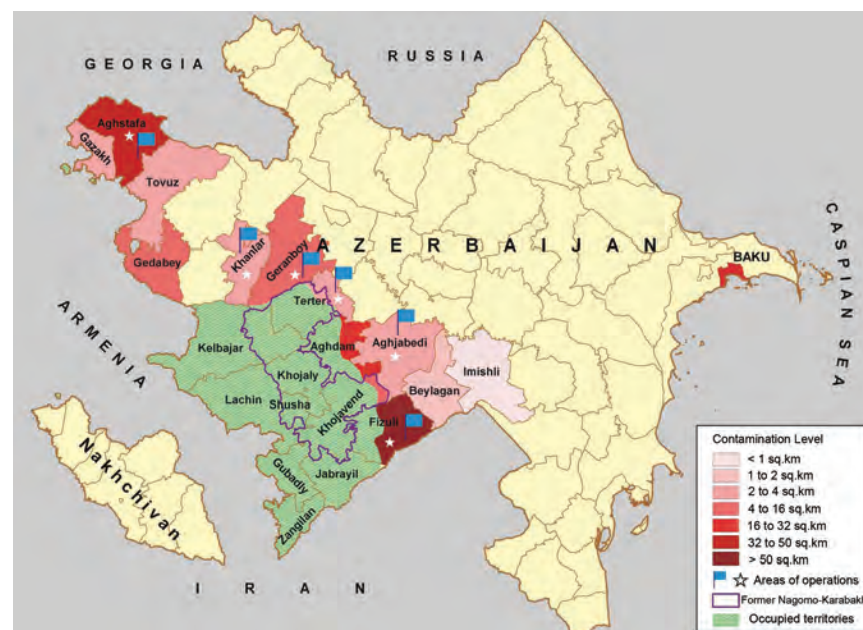
This article explains the danger of explosive remnants of war¹ when located within communities and the precautions that need to be taken in order to get rid of this problem. It also describes how the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action is trying to address the problem of abandoned ammunition storage in one of the most highly contaminated areas among existing abandoned ammunition storages in the world.

by Nazim 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 it is generally understood that the problems ERW cause are both widespread and long-term, and that the number of casualties and deaths caused by both unexploded and abandoned grenades, mortar shells, fuzes and cluster bombs is high and equivalent to landmines. The physical and psychological impacts of ERW on a community are significant considering the number of deaths and nature of injuries caused, which can overload often stretched medical infrastructures. ERW also have a wider 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 ERW 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.
- ERW are generally found on the surface and are therefore more visible, which can result in more interaction with ERW than mines. Also, UXO can be located subsurface where clearance can be particularly difficult.
- The fear of UXO is generally lower than the fear of mines because UXO can be more visible and this gives people a false impression of safety, which can be very dangerous.
- ERW are unpredictable and can detonate at anytime due to a variety of stimuli.



Operational map of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Green denotes the occupied area of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding areas.
ALL GRAPHICS AND PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANAMA

Azerbaijan has not signed the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons² or the Ottawa Convention³ 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 regions, totaling 20 percent of Azerbaijan. Today there are just under eight million people in Azerbaijan. Of these, 650,000 are internally displaced persons and 300,000 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.”⁴ This document states, “The government of Azerbaijan has supported from the outset 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 demining 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 acceding 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 northwest part of Azerbaijan, bordering the Kazakh region in the west, Tovuz in the east, the Republic of Georgia in the north and Armenia in the south.

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



UXO operators' rapid reaction to a violent explosion at an illegal workshop set up by locals approximately 200 metres (219 yards) from residential area in Agstafa town (October 21, 2005).

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 are exposing 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\$1.3 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 Australia, Finland, Luxembourg, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey



Abandoned ammunitions in Saloglu village and surrounding areas (Agstafa region)—presently an operational site for clearance.

and the United States—as well as the United Nations Development Programme, the required funding for the project has been raised. The Azerbaijan National Agency or Mine Action UXO team, with a capacity of 11 UXO operators, launched the project 13 December 2005. ANAMA instructors joined with United States European Command (USEUCOM) specialists to train an additional 36 UXO operators for the same project at ANAMA's Regional Office in Khanlar (UXO team capacity within ANAMA was created with the support of USEUCOM in 2002).

Abandoned ammunition storage clearance. In describing the problem of ERW, the threat of abandoned ammunition is also significant. When researching information on the subject of abandoned ammunition, cases can be found in Nigeria, Albania and Kuwait, but thus far minimal information describing Azerbaijan's abandoned ammunition problem is available. The Soviet warehouse in Agstafa can provide an additional case for better understanding the threat of abandoned ammunition and the challenges that groups like ANAMA face in order to clear this type of ERW.

The task for abandoned Soviet munition storage clearance in Agstafa is very complicated and dangerous for several reasons:

- The occurrence of “ammunition spreads” in which different types of ammunition are mixed and scattered throughout the area
- The presence of degraded *flechette* and fragmentation ammunition, which consist of small projectile darts and shrapnel that are hazardous and not immediately identifiable
- The presence of white phosphorus, which ignites when exposed to air
- Incorrect or misleading marking of UXO

Taking into account that 15 years have passed since the warehouse explosion, clearance of this ammunition is a complicated—yet extremely important—task.

In addition to planned clearance projects such as these mentioned, ANAMA also provides rapid response to mine/UXO-related emergencies. When one Agstafa scrap-metal workshop set up by locals exploded approximately 200 metres (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 kilometres (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, 170,000 square metres (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 takai mono wa nai*” (“We have to pay much more for something we got free of charge”). 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



Nazim Ismaylov studied building engineering at Azerbaijan State Polytechnic Institute, graduating in 1966. He has worked as the Director of the Building Structures Plant and headed the Republican Building Structures Trust. In 1989 he was appointed First Deputy Minister of Industrial Engineering of the Republic of Azerbaijan, which later was reorganized into AzerPromStroy Joint-Stock Company. He has been the Director of the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action since May 2001.

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News Brief

Death Valley Challenge to Raise \$100K

Mines Advisory Group, in partnership with CEIA USA, will sponsor a 423-kilometre (263-mile) bike trek across Death Valley, USA. Event organizers hope to raise nearly £40,000 (US\$74,000) to support mine-action efforts around the globe.

From 4–11 March 2007, 40 participants will travel and cycle to raise money and awareness. The registration fee for the event is only £175 (\$325), but each participant is asked to raise £2,750 (\$5,100) in sponsorships, half of which will cover the cost of running the event. Included in trek costs are London-to-Las Vegas airfare, accommodations, nearly all meals, the use of bicycles and other sundry expenses.

For more information on this trip, visit www.magclearmines.org.