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Belarus

by Daniele Ressler [[Mine Action Information Center](#)]

An heir to massive Soviet stockpiles of anti-personnel mines and other munitions, Belarus has been actively facing its extensive explosive legacy through significant destruction of this explosive ordnance. Belarus is also affected by unexploded and abandoned ordnance left in large part from heavy fighting between German and Soviet troops during World War II and, to a lesser degree, minefields laid by both sides.¹ Additional explosive remnants of war² come from World War I and the 18th and 19th century's Napoleonic wars.¹

Belarus's Mine and UXO Problem

Belarus reported in April 2006 almost 3.7 million mines left from Soviet stockpiling,¹ the third largest Soviet legacy cache following Russia and Ukraine.³ This included approximately 3.4 million PFM-1 mines and 300,000 other anti-personnel mines, the latter of which have since been destroyed.¹

Along with these massive stockpiles, Belarus is affected by mines and unexploded ordnance in the ground mainly found in agricultural land and forests, but also in major cities including the capital city of Minsk.⁴ In the most affected areas, UXO contamination is so extensive that soil movement brings items of ordnance to the surface even after previous clearance.⁴ For Belarus, both World War II UXO and Soviet stockpiles are a larger problem than emplaced mines¹; since 1945 at least 26 million items of UXO have been cleared from the ground.⁵

In 2006, a senior official from the Ministry of Defense reported an estimated 353 square kilometers (136 square miles) of land still requires demining.¹ However, a lack of national information collection and sharing hinders a full understanding of the scope, extent and impact of mine/UXO threat in Belarus.⁵ There are no maps of mined areas in existence and suspected hazardous areas are not marked off until the presence of a mine or ERW is confirmed.^{1,6}

According to the *Landmine Monitor*, UXO killed three people and injured one in 2005; there were less than 16 casualties in 2004.¹ According to an official MoD database, between 1944 and February 2006, 3,506 injuries and 2,655 deaths from mines and UXO were recorded in Belarus.¹ Recent casualties have been attributed to "black demining," or



Graphic courtesy of MAIC

handling of UXO for its scrap metal and explosives to sell on the black market.

UXO and Stockpile Destruction

Belarus has no national mine-action authority or center; rather, the Ministers of Defense and Interior share the duties of mine action, demining and explosive ordnance disposal, with national demining standards and operating procedures developed by the MoD.¹

Little attention has been given to nationally planned land clearance. No plans were made for clearance activities in 2006, with the government stating funding was not available; rather, clearance occurred ad hoc in response to reports of mines or UXO found in the ground.¹ Almost 29,000 items of ERW, including 58 anti-personnel mines and nearly 3,000 anti-tank mines, were reportedly found and destroyed in 2005.¹

Since 2004, however, Belarus has put great effort into addressing the huge task of destroying its 3.7 million Soviet-stockpiled landmines—reportedly the seventh largest AP mine stockpile in the world⁷—in time for the Ottawa Convention's Article 4⁷ deadline of 1 March 2008. To that end, by the start of 2007, Belarus reported that all of its approximately 300,000 stockpiled AP landmines containing TNT were destroyed with the assistance of Canadian and Lithuanian funding through the NATO Partnership for Peace Program.^{7,9}

Belarus' monumental challenge now is destroying its 3.4 million PFM-1 mines. These PFMs contain liquid explosives that create toxic byproducts if destroyed through burning/open detonation.¹⁰ Their destruction is a high priority because as these mines have been stored past their safe shelf life, they have the potential to deteriorate and detonate; however, safe destruction requires specialized techniques and funding that Belarus does not have.⁵ The country has regularly issued pleas for assistance in this complex and expensive task.¹¹

Progress and Challenges of Mine Action in Belarus

Since 1998 the Belarus Support Center for Associations and Foundations, the Belarus Campaign to Ban Landmines and Belarusian government have been working together in a partnership that has resulted over the years in a number of accomplishments, including transparent reporting on mine-action issues.¹²

Belarus acceded to the Ottawa Convention¹³ on 3 September 2003, which entered into force on 1 March 2004. Belarusian officials have shown interest in promoting full implementation and universalization of the Convention, although the International Campaign to Ban Landmines has asked Belarus to reevaluate its official position that there are no "specific mined areas" in the country and therefore no Article 5¹⁴ obligations to clear all mines by March 2014.⁹

The government has provided mine-risk education to all seven regions of Belarus¹ and the subject has been included in school curricula to educate children.⁹ National disability laws exist in Belarus and government officials report survivor-assistance needs are sufficiently met through medical, surgical, rehabilitation and reintegration services provided by the government. Prostheses and care are largely provided by the Belarus Prosthetic Rehabilitation Center, which serves disabled persons including landmine/UXO survivors; most amputees receive prosthetic devices free of charge.¹ The BPRC has a program for landmine survivors and other disabled persons that offers training in computer skills and other much-needed professional skills.⁹

As Belarus Support Center for Associations and Foundations Director Dr. Zagoumenov notes, the greatest challenge Belarus faces at the start of 2007 is the destruction of Belarus' 3.4 million PFM mines.¹⁵ The destruction project will commence no later than September 2007. According to Zagoumenov, while there was initially an agreement for the European Commission to provide €3 million (US\$ 4.08 million¹⁶) toward destruction of the PFM-type mines in 2006, it fell through after a number of EOD companies withdrew their bids. In 2007, no new guarantee of EC funding has been

secured, although Belarus hopes the EC will provide €4 million (\$5.44 million¹⁶) toward destruction. Even if this does occur, however, he points out that actual destruction of the mines will probably not commence before 2008, meaning that Belarus may not meet its stockpile destruction deadline of 1 March 2008 even if EC funds are secured by September 2007.

Looking Ahead

Dr. Zagoumenov concludes that the Belarusian government still lacks adequate resources to destroy its massive stockpile of ecologically dangerous PFM mines.¹⁵ With international support, however, Belarus has already destroyed its 300,000 non-PFM mines and can continue to work toward ridding the country of the rest so the future remains hopeful. ↕

Biography



Daniele Ressler is Assistant Editor and Research Specialist for the *Journal of Mine Action*. She holds a Master of Science in violence, conflict and development studies from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. She has also studied in both Caux, Switzerland, earning a Certificate for Applied Studies in peacebuilding, and Nairobi, Kenya. Daniele has previously worked in the fields of conflict mediation and youth counseling.

Endnotes

1. "Belarus." *Landmine Monitor Report 2006: Towards a Mine-Free World*. New York: International Campaign to Ban Landmines. <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2006/belarus.html>. Accessed 1 February 2007.
2. **Editor's Note:** Some organizations consider mines and ERW to be two separate entities, since they are regulated by different legal documents (the former by the Ottawa Convention and Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the latter by CCW Protocol V). However, since mines are explosive devices that have similar effects to other ERW and it is often impossible to separate the two during clearance operations, some in the community have adopted a "working definition" (as opposed to a legal one) of ERW in which it is a blanket term that includes mines, UXO, abandoned explosive ordnance and other explosive devices.
3. "7MSP Regional and Country Media Backgrounders: CIS." International Campaign to Ban Landmines. From 7th Meeting of States Parties, 18–22 September 2006, Geneva, Switzerland. [http://www.icbl.org/treaty/meetings/7msp/media/backgrounders#COMMONWEALTH%20OF%20INDEPENDENT%20STATES%20\(CIS\)](http://www.icbl.org/treaty/meetings/7msp/media/backgrounders#COMMONWEALTH%20OF%20INDEPENDENT%20STATES%20(CIS)). Accessed 4 February 2007.
4. Moyes, R., ed. "Belarus." *ERW and MOPTM: Global Survey 2003–2004*. Landmine Action. 2004. p. 27–28. <http://www.landmineaction.org/resources/UKWGLM.pdf>. Accessed 14 February 2007.
5. "Inter-agency Assessment Mission Report, Belarus." United Nations Mine Action Service. 31 July–4 August 2000. http://www.mineaction.org/docs/110_.asp. Accessed 9 February 2007.
6. ERW contamination in Belarus was found by the United Nations Mine Action Service's Inter-agency Assessment Mission Report (see endnote 5) to have a limited socioeconomic impact in Belarus because "only a small amount of the total land available for agricultural use is contaminated"; however, because dangerous areas are not fenced or marked and little information exists about location or potential density of contamination, civilians in affected areas consistently face a potential unknown threat of ERW (Inter-agency Assessment Mission Report, UNMAS, p. 13).
7. "Belarus Says Landmine Disposal Deadline Likely to be Extended." Belapan News Agency, distributed by BBC Monitoring Ukraine and Baltics. 16 January 2007.
8. Article 4 of the Ottawa Convention requires each signatory to "destroy or ensue the destruction of all stockpiled mines it owns or possesses, or that are under its jurisdiction or control, as soon as possible but not later than four years after the entry into force of this Convention for that State Party." See endnote 13 for Ottawa Convention document details.
9. Gabelnick, Tamar. "Belarus Stockpile Destruction Event and Treaty Implementation Workshop." International Campaign to Ban Landmines. 2 June 2006. <http://www.icbl.org/news/belarus2006>. Accessed 14 February 2007.
10. Dolgov, Roman. "Landmines in Russia and the Former Soviet Union: A Lethal Epidemic." *Medicine and Global Survival*. April 2001, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 38–42.
11. Wareham, M. "Landmine Stockpile and Transparency Factsheets Released." International Campaign to Ban Landmines. 31 May 2002. <http://www.icbl.org/news/archive/old/182>. Accessed 9 February 2007.

12. "The Third International Ottawa Convention Implementation Workshop." Welcoming speech by International Campaign to Ban Landmines representative at the Third International Ottawa Convention Implementation Workshop, 22–24 May 2006 in Minsk, Belarus. <http://www.icbl.org/news/belarus2006/belarusopenremarks>. Accessed 14 February 2007.
13. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction*, Oslo, Norway. 18 September 1997. http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban_trty.htm. Accessed 4 March 2007. The document was opened for signature in Ottawa, Canada, 3 December 1997, and thus is commonly known as the Ottawa Convention.
14. Article 5 of the Ottawa Convention requires that signatories: identify all mined or mine-suspected areas; ensure these areas are marked, monitored and protected to protect civilians; and destroy or ensure destruction of all mines in these areas as soon as possible and **no later than 10 years** after the Convention's entry into force. See endnote 13 for Ottawa Convention document details.
15. E-mail interview with Dr. Iouri Zagoumenov, Director of Belarus Support Center for Associations and Foundations (SCAF), 21 February 2007.
16. Conversion as of 26 April 2007.

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