

Journal of Mine Action

JMA
11.1
SUMMER 2007

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Nagorno-Karabakh

by Kateland Shane [Mine Action Information Center]

On the border between the territory¹ of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, gunfire can be heard on a daily basis.² These occurrences, along with the presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance, are reminders of the long-standing tensions between the populations of the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and the country of Azerbaijan.

Background of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Nagorno-Karabakh, or the "mountainous black garden," is a rolling, fertile region located within the southwestern area of Azerbaijan. It is marred by its history of conflict.³ In 1988, Nagorno-Karabakh voted to secede from Azerbaijan to join Armenia, triggering animosity and acts of violence when an ethnic struggle broke out in Sumgait (now called Sumqayit), a port town north of Baku, Azerbaijan.⁴ Many reports claim the violence in Sumgait sparked the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but there are differing views about this.⁵

On 10 December 1991, the principally ethnic Armenian region of Nagorno-Karabakh held an independence referendum in which nearly 100 percent of voters chose independence.⁶ Although the territory still proclaims autonomy, its sovereignty is not internationally or legally recognized. Neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan acknowledges the territory's independence.⁷ Outright violence ended in 1994 with a Russian-negotiated ceasefire; however, peace talks are still underway. Analysts believe a peace agreement will not be reached before the 2008 elections in Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁸ The conflict has claimed 25,000 lives and displaced almost one million refugees, both Armenian and Azeri.⁹

Landmines and UXO in Nagorno-Karabakh

Unfortunately, there is not much public information on the original mine and UXO contamination in Nagorno-Karabakh, but speculation claims it is serious. During the conflict, at least 50,000 landmines were laid by both the Azeri and pro-Karabakhi sides; some sources have even reported figures of up to 100,000 mines. In fact, "[v]iewing it against density of the population and size of the republic, experts say that the landmine level in Nagorno-Karabakh is close to that of Afghanistan."¹⁰ Recurrent movement of the frontlines during the war caused widespread contamination. There are still 198 minefields and 300 UXO sites remaining in Nagorno-Karabakh, impacting the socioeconomic development of the



Graphic courtesy of MAIC

region.¹¹

The most mine-affected area is considered to be the town of Lachin, one of the regions of Azerbaijan occupied by Karabakh with a population of about 6,000.¹² In addition, Nagorno-Karabakh suffers from scattered UXO and abandoned explosive ordnance. Nearly 300 civilians have suffered injuries or fatalities from mines and UXO in Nagorno-Karabakh. This number does not include the thousands of domesticated animals that have also been killed. In 2006, there were 14 mine- and UXO-related incidents recorded involving people in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹¹

Nagorno-Karabakh cannot sign any legislation concerning mine action because it is not an officially recognized state. Political leaders in Nagorno-Karabakh have stated that while they support the terms of the Ottawa Convention,¹³ even if they could become a signatory, they would not do so because of the ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan.¹⁴

Mine Action in Nagorno-Karabakh

Although the need for mine action in Nagorno-Karabakh is great, there have been few organizations working in this region since the 1994 ceasefire. The HALO Trust and the International Committee of the Red Cross are two organizations that have worked to bring clearance and mine-risk education activities to the territory.

The HALO Trust. The HALO Trust is currently the sole organization conducting mine clearance and mine-risk education in Nagorno-Karabakh. HALO first entered Karabakh in 1995–1996 temporarily to conduct mine-clearance training for military in the region. The nongovernmental organization returned in 2000 following a series of mine/UXO accidents and set up the Nagorno-Karabakh Mine Action Center.¹⁵ As of 1 February 2007, the organization has cleared or marked 377 minefields in Nagorno-Karabakh and cleared an additional 307 UXO sites. In 2006, The HALO Trust reported it cleared 5,986,183 square meters (1,479 acres) of mines and conducted battle-area clearance on 14,134,918 square meters (3,493 acres). Their objective for 2007 is to clear six million square meters (1,482 acres) of and conduct BAC in another 12 million square meters (2,965 acres).¹¹

Since 2003, The HALO Trust has also been responsible for reaching 30,256 people in Nagorno-Karabakh through MRE, not including HALO MRE television and radio broadcasts. In 2007, HALO plans to continue MRE presentations and lessons in at-risk communities of Nagorno-Karabakh for both children and adult populations. HALO MRE messages will also continue to air on public television and radio stations in Nagorno-Karabakh.¹¹

ICRC. Although the International Committee of the Red Cross has not conducted mine action in Nagorno-Karabakh since 2005, the organization has helped to make the region a safer place for youth. In a project funded by the Norwegian Red Cross from 2002–2004, the ICRC worked closely with residents of 40 communities to construct safe play areas for children.¹⁶

The Future of Mine Action in Nagorno-Karabakh

Although a peace agreement may not be in the immediate future, a safer environment for the people of Nagorno-Karabakh is in the making. The HALO Trust states that its vision for the territory is a "mine- and UXO-impact-free region that no longer suffers mine and UXO casualties and fatalities, within five years [of January 2007]."¹¹ With the ongoing support and maintenance of current donors, the organization will be able to achieve its vision. 🌱

Biography

Kateland Shane has worked as an Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Mine Action* since May 2006. She graduated from James Madison University in May 2007 with a Bachelor of Science in technical communication. She is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in technical communication at JMU.



Endnotes

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