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Use of Landmines in Azerbaijan and its Consequences

The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenian over the last decade featured the widespread use of landmines. While the *Journal of Mine Action* does not take a position on which nation opened hostilities or first employed landmines against the other, the author of the following article lays out his interpretation of the major events of the conflict as well as the possibility of both countries banning landmines in the near future.

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Introduction

February 2003 marked 15 years since the Armenian Republic started undeclared war with the Azerbaijan Republic for disputed territory—the war that is known globally as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Much has been written and told about this war; however, the research conducted was mainly devoted to the history and character of these events. The purpose of my article is to inform you of the prejudices of the war inflicted on Azerbaijan, and of the effects of landmines, which were widely used during this war.

Before starting my article, I have to point out that it is very difficult to carry out research on such topics because the majority of documents and materials, including those about landmines, are under the control of the Ministries of Defense in both countries. Naturally, the administration of the Ministries is not interested in disseminating or making the materials public even to international organizations. Official representatives of the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which are engaged in landmine issues, also complain about the lack of information and mapping of landmines. Despite these difficulties, we were able to receive data about some points of this conflict. In order to make the facts about the use of landmines more understandable for you (i.e., the specific character-created problems and losses), I will describe the history of events in chronological order.

The Beginning of the Conflict

The first information about subversive activity on the roads and acts of terrorism appeared during the summer of 1989. At that time, Armenians initiated the use of landmines and mine-like munitions. During that time period, the authority of Azerbaijan relied on Moscow and the Central Body, who prevented the Azerbaijan population from using any kind of weapons. However, choosing the tactics of subversive activity and partisan war, the Armenian side attacked the internal troops of the USSR and started to apply homemade landmines and mortars.¹

On August 10, 1989, the first act of terrorism occurred. The passenger bus of Tbilisi-Agdam route was mined near Ganja city; as a result, 29 people died and 22 were injured. One month later on September 16, 1989, the bus of Tbilisi-Baku route was detonated; five people died and 25 were injured. On October of the same year, there was an incident in a

Simferopol-Baku passenger train. This time it was revealed that the implementers of the act were not professionals and their homemade landmines were not safe for even themselves. Thus, in late 1989, while mining the motor road and railway, two terrorists died from an errant explosion.

At that time on the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomy Oblast, anti-personnel mines were being used to undermine vehicles. All the landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) used in the assassinations were purchased from Regiment #366, located in Khankendi city and belonged to Russia.

Outside Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, other mine-like munitions were used. From 1990–1994, as a result of acts of terrorism on a Rostov-Baku train, the Tbilisi-Baku bus, a Krasnovodsk-Baku ferry and the Baku underground station, 143 people died and 446 people were injured. The most tragic event on the territory of Karabakh happened on February 18, 1990. The Baku-Shusha bus was mined—four people died and 15 were injured. Overall, 2,000 people died or were injured as a result of 32 acts of terrorism.²

The Tashkent Treaty Heightens Warfare From Both Sides

Up until the summer of 1992, both sides had used landmines, but the initiative was on the Armenian side. In the spring of 1992, the first information about the use of landmines by the Azerbaijan side was received. However, due to lack of experience, their attempt failed. In accordance with the official order of the Ministry of Defense, the territory around Shusha—the strongest fortress of Karabakh—was mined. Nevertheless, during the Armenians' attack, both the military equipment and troops could enter the city without obstacles.

On May 15, 1992, the situation deteriorated after the signing of the Tashkent Treaty. After the treaty, both Armenia and Azerbaijan could get an abundant supply of various weapons and ammunition from the military inheritance of the USSR. As a result of broad use of these weapons, including the landmines, the number of victims from both sides increased. Both sides immediately started to build fortresses and use landmines.

Through the end of 1992, the Azerbaijan army was conducting attack operations and the Armenian side was widely using the landmines to prevent those attacks. In 1993, the situation changed; Armenia started attacking and the Azerbaijan army was on the defensive, using all the weapons and ammunition in its arsenal. In October of 1993, the Armenian army captured Nagorno-Karabakh and seven neighboring regions. About 20 percent of Azerbaijan's land was seized, including 11 cities and six towns. The number of refugees was also increasing. In 1992, there were 233,000 refugees in Azerbaijan (185,000 Azeris who fled from Armenia and 48,000 Meshetian Turks). Now the figure increased to 604,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from seven regions outside of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In late 1993, after all these losses and regular political crisis, the Azerbaijan army prevented the attacks of Armenia and started a counterattack. In 1994, during the winter campaign due to certain losses, the Azerbaijan army liberated 22 seized villages in the Fizuli region. As for the mine-affected territory in the northern and central parts of the front, the Azerbaijan army could not succeed further. In April of 1994, the Armenian army started a heavy attack in the central part of the front but again had to stop its attack because of significant losses and difficulties with landmines.

Referring to the information of the Hazard Area Life-Support Organization (HALO), currently the territory of the seized regions and their borders are heavily mine-affected and it is impossible to demine them now because these lands are still very dangerous. The mine-affected territory includes Lachin "corridor," Askeran, Agdam and Agdere regions.³ In Azerbaijan, the following landmines were found during the process of demining:

- Anti-personnel mines: MON-50 (USSR), MON-100 (USSR), OZM-72 (USSR), PMN (USSR, China), PMN-2 (USSR), PFM-1 (USSR), POMZ-2 (USSR)
- Anti-tank mines: TM-57, TM-62M, TM-62P (all produced in the USSR)
- Homemade mines and field-charges

Consequences of the Conflict

As a consequence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, official statistics say that 20,000 people from the Azerbaijan side died and 50,000 people were injured.⁴ Also, the Saloglu district, located northwest of Azerbaijan and situated in the neighborhood with Gazakh, Tovuz, and Agstafa districts, was previously one of the largest military stores of the USSR army in the Caucasus. After Soviet units left Azerbaijan, the store was blown up and all the pieces of UXO in the store were disseminated over a territory covering roughly 6,755,000 square meters. After the explosion of the biggest military ammunition depot in Saloglu, there have been more than 200 victims (since August of 1991). Seventy-five of the victims died and many lost their hands, legs, fingers, sight or hearing.⁵ In one non-governmental organization (NGO), the Association of Karabakh Invalids, there are over 8,000 invalids, most of who are mine victims.⁶

As a result of military operations, the harm to the economy of Azerbaijan was devastating and has not yet been estimated. In Azerbaijan, 20 percent of its territory was seized by the Armenian army. In that occupied territory, there were over 300 industrial and construction objects, over 400 agricultural objects and about 4,000 institutions of consumer services. The majority of these objects have been completely destroyed or need major repairs. The UN Development Program (UNDP) estimates that economic loss in Azerbaijan is \$5 billion (U.S.).

After the ceasefire in 1994–1996, the Engineers' Troops of Azerbaijan cleared 41,000 mines on the liberated territory—19,000 of which were anti-personnel mines and 22,000 of which were anti-tank mines.⁷ In July of 1998, the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) was created in accordance with the Decree of the president of the Azerbaijan Republic. At the present time, this organization is conducting mine clearance on the territories of Fizuli, Goranboy, Agstafa and Khanlar regions. Up until the May of 2003, ANAMA has cleared 4,325,468 square meters; held major research on 56 million square meters of territory; and conducted technical investigation on 1,404,883 square meters. As result of the performed activity, 3,021 items of UXO, 82 anti-personnel mines and 53 anti-tank mines were demined.⁸

The senior officials of the Azerbaijan Republic, Deputy Prime Minister Mr. Abid Sharifov and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Vilayet Guliyev, repeatedly showed the official attitude of the Azerbaijan government to the Ottawa Convention. The official statement says, "Azerbaijan approves the ideas of the Ottawa Convention, but still cannot join it. Azerbaijan will join it after liberating the seized lands and concluding the Peace Treaty with Armenia."

Conclusion

What conclusion can be made? The difference between the Karabakh conflict and other incidents is that the Karabakh conflict started during the USSR period and was considered an internal conflict for a period of time. That was why during the initial stages of conflict, landmines were not widely used. At that time only homemade anti-personnel mines were used for mining vehicles. But after the collapse of the USSR and independence of the Republics, the conflict became international. As a result of the Tashkent Treaty, dated on May 15, 1992, both sides got an abundant supply of weapons and ammunition, which resulted in numerous victims among military men and citizens. The UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) estimated that 65 percent of victims of landmines were civilians. Though the ceasefire has continued for nine years, the clearance of mine-affected territory in Azerbaijan is still a big problem, which prevents repatriation of IDPs and their peaceful existence there.

Finally, I would like to point out my own awareness of the official standpoint of Azerbaijan and Armenian governments to this problem (during last year's visit to Yerevan, I met with state officials and recently I was able to get acquainted with the opinions of Armenian government officials). Taking into consideration all of the discussions I had with both state and government officials, the Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines, which I represent, suggested both governments join the Ottawa Convention in 2002 and advocated the idea within the possible limits.

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