

# Mine Risk Education: The Effective Way to Save Lives

In March 2000, the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) assumed responsibility of the Mine Risk Education (MRE) Program implemented by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) from 1997 to 1999. Through training mine risk educators and implementing an MRE program in for affected communities and refugees, ANAMA is hoping to reduce the number of incidents in Azerbaijan.



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## Introduction

According to the Azerbaijan Mine Action Program, MRE is to be supported by and integrated with other forthcoming mine-related activities in Azerbaijan. MRE is considered to be a core pillar of mine action, the first step in decreasing mine/UXO injury and death rates among the population in contaminated areas.

In May 2000, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with the U.S. Embassy to Azerbaijan on funding the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) MRE Program for Azerbaijan. The program was implemented and coordinated in close cooperation with ANAMA during 2001 and 2002.

## Program Activities

The activities in the frame of the program have been conducted mainly on the basis of the general survey data on suspected mine/UXO areas and incidents with the people involved in 11 war-torn districts of Azerbaijan. The number of mine/UXO victims in surveyed territories since the start of the conflict is estimated to be 1,248. According to the ANAMA Mine Victim Database, 391 people—mainly civilian women and children—became mine/UXO victims since the signing of the ceasefire agreement in May 1994. That was a main reason for making a decision to implement MRE for the civilian population living in frontier and bordering districts.

Fifteen MRE master trainers were trained in February 2001 and they had two

refresher training courses, in March and during July to August 2002, with participation of 18 instructors. During September to December of 2001, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Education, the trainers conducted 30 three-day training sessions for 508 health personnel, and 59 four-day training sessions for 1043 teachers in 12 frontline districts—Fizuli, Beylagan, Agjabedi, Aghdam, Aghstafa, Gazakh, Tovuz, Terter, Geranboy, Khanlar, Dashkesan and Gedabey—as well as in internally displaced person (IDP) camps. Four hundred volunteers from the villages of targeted districts were trained in August 2002 to implement community-based MRE.

An MRE Technical Working Group formed in early 2001, consisting of representatives of several related ministries and other governmental institutions, as well as international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have played and are playing an active role in implementation and coordination of MRE activities. Training sessions are aimed to disseminate MRE safety messages and safe behavior rules among the population and to convey safe behavior rules through teachers to schoolchildren.

A total of 220,000 MRE brochures for adults and children, 150,000 children's notebooks, 10,000 training manuals and 7,000 T-shirts were produced for the purposes of the program. MRE materials were distributed to health and education departments and civil defence headquarters of the targeted districts as well. Ten sets of mine/UXO models were prepared for



Azerbaijani children learn about the dangers of mines through MRE programs. c/o ICRC



training needs. Use of visual aids ensured the efficiency of MRE training sessions. Seventy-six mass propaganda billboards were produced and set up in 49 villages of nine frontline districts. The Republic Child Organization, as a leading implementer, performed 17 safe behavior-related theatre shows at schools in mine/UXO contaminated villages and for school-children in densely populated IDP camp settlements. Effective achievements have been gained in MRE implementation because of close cooperation with related ministries, children's organizations and local authorities in targeted districts.

## 2003 and Beyond

Because of funding, UNICEF stopped the implementation of MRE activities since the end of 2002, and of course, the responsibility fell again on ANAMA. The comprehensive activity plan for 2003 has been developed to integrate MRE into the school curriculum of contaminated districts and densely populated IDP camps and implement community-based MRE in all targeted districts as well. The decision has been made to conduct regular training sessions for organizations active in frontline districts and develop the MRE capacity of staff members of ANAMA Regional Office teams and demining NGOs. All these activities will be supported with new training materials and visual aids.

In the frame of the annual activity plan, MRE training sessions have been conducted for deminers, operational and support staff members of the Regional Office, and national mine action NGOs Dayag and the International Eurasia Press Fund (IEPF). We kept close cooperation with child organizations such as Shafa, Nur and Reliable Future, which received training afterwards.

In order to initiate awareness activities within the districts, ANAMA Monitoring and Training Team (MTT) members received additional MRE training. The team members are successful now in conducting MRE where the clearance operations are ongoing. A regular reporting system has been established so that ANAMA headquarters receives monthly reports on MRE activities implemented by MTT, Dayag and IEPF instructors.

## *Two dead: UXO explosion in scrap metal shop in Baku—June 2, 2003*

*The incident happened towards evening on June 2<sup>nd</sup>. All these pieces of UXO were brought from an exploded ammunition depot near Saloglu village of Aghstafa district. Members of Disabled Soldiers' Society of Gazakh district provided them as a high-quality scrap metal. To make a profit, they were welded here for delivery to a steel company. Good welders, two refugee men from Armenia, both 35, were hired to handle the UXO. While welding, the ammunition exploded and both died in situ.*

*It was realized that a lot of UXO remains there. No doubt, the ammunition might explode, possibly claiming new victims.*

ANAMA's MRE team has had good cooperation with the Golden West Humanitarian Foundation (United States), under the financial support of which Colin King Associates (United Kingdom) produced a "Mined Area Indicator Package" for Azerbaijan that was approved in ANAMA and then adapted and translated into the Azeri language by ANAMA MRE staff. It is likely that the Indicator Package will be used as PowerPoint presentation, and ANAMA has been provided with the laptops and multimedia projectors. Sets of printouts of presentation slides are also good additional teaching tools to provide communities and various target groups with sufficient MRE information.

Additional refresher MRE training for a group of ANAMA staff members and mine action NGOs, supported by U.S. European Command (EUCOM) instructors, was conducted in February 2003. The MRE team is going to hold community-based MRE sessions in targeted districts to build and strengthen community associations.

U.S. EUCOM training sessions during last summer had a great influence on increasing (both qualitatively and

quantitatively) ANAMA's MRE capacity. As a result of the training, establishment of an MRE Cell was recommended. The Cell is now active and able not only to provide formal narrative instructions on safe behavior, but also to identify and implement MRE strategic objectives in Azerbaijan.

The increased interest in the mine problem from the society in Azerbaijan makes it possible to disseminate safety messages and safe behavior rules among the people, under favorable auspices, ensuring that innocent lives are saved from the mine and UXO threats.

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