TNMAC’S VICTIM ASSISTANCE ACTIVITIES:
The Mental Health Aspect of Survivors and HMA Personnel

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Tajikistan, a State Party to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) since 1 April 2000, contains a significant number of landmine victims and survivors. The Tajikistan National Mine Action Center (TNMAC) is using the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) Core for its data collection and reporting, including information on persons killed or injured by mines as well as their needs and challenges. This information is disaggregated by gender, age, and disability. Since 1992, the total number of casualties resulting from accidents with landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) is 885 (535 survivors; 350 fatalities).

In accordance with Article 6.3 of the APMBC, Tajikistan is responsible for looking after its own landmine victims. The Convention states that “each State Party in a position to do so shall provide assistance for the care and rehabilitation, and social and economic reintegration, of landmine victims.” Action 38 of the Oslo Action Plan clarifies that each State Party should “Take steps to ensure that, taking into account local, national and regional circumstances, all mine victims, including in rural and remote areas, have access to comprehensive rehabilitation services and psychological and psychosocial support services, including through the provision of outreach rehabilitation service, where necessary, while paying particular attention to the most vulnerable.”

Since the Tajikistan Mine Action Programme (TMAP) began, psychosocial rehabilitation has been recognized as a critical component of its victim assistance (VA) initiatives due to how most landmine survivors show symptoms of chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Namely, survivors often have reduced emotional well-being due to depression, anxiety, fear, anger, dependence on others, and isolation due to feelings of shame, guilt, and discrimination.

While landmine survivors with critical incident stress (CIS), a common response to an abnormal event (e.g., a landmine explosion), are provided for by traditional medical care in Tajikistan, most survivors of landmine accidents have delayed reactions to CIS. Additionally, survivors often do not receive psychological first aid (PFA) and psychosocial rehabilitation. As in many other post-conflict countries, rural hospitals and clinics close to the mine-affected areas in Tajikistan do not have specialists in psychological support that could provide PFA to landmine survivors and families of survivors. Additionally, Tajikistan does not have existing peer-to-peer support groups.

After conducting a needs assessment survey, TMAP and its partners developed a number of projects aimed to provide direct support to landmine survivors through individual counselling sessions and summer rehabilitation workshops. These projects aim to (a) build the capacity of landmine survivors to support each other via peer-to-peer support programs; (b) strengthen the capacity of humanitarian mine action (HMA) paramedics and medical staff working in mine-affected districts to provide PFA to landmine survivors and other persons who underwent amputations; and (c) exchange experiences with regional colleagues and experts working in these fields through participation in relevant conferences and trainings.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, sessions on the psychosocial effects of the pandemic were conducted for members of the Victim Assistance Technical Working Group (VA TWG) and paramedics.
TNMAC Summer Rehabilitation Workshops

Since 2005, TNMAC and its partners have organized summer rehabilitation workshops to provide psychological and physiological rehabilitation, trainings, and advocacy support to landmine survivors as well as to raise public awareness of VA activities. Since its inception, more than 750 landmine survivors have benefitted from the workshops. The summer workshops improve survivors’ general health by bringing together physiotherapy and adaptive sports in a supportive atmosphere to enhance participants’ communication and social-integration skills. The workshops also provide psychological rehabilitation for participants through mindfulness, art therapy, and individual/group psychological sessions under the supervision of professional psychologists and artists, which improves self-confidence and self-esteem among survivors. As an evidence-based treatment, trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy for PTSD is used during individual sessions. It includes psychoeducation, memory restructuring, and narrative exposure therapy approaches, transforms survivors’ core negative beliefs, and teaches survivors techniques on how to regulate their emotions.

Survivors who attend the camps are surprised by the positive effects of the art therapy, which helps to reduce their aggression, anxiety, and fatigue, giving them a more positive outlet for their negative emotions. Additionally, survivors find that the therapy improves their creativity, self-expression, overall mood, and resilience in managing emergencies and stressful life events for all HMA workers, a necessary element toward addressing psychosocial issues and strengthening mental health.

“The summer rehabilitation workshop gave me new inspiration for ... life because I met with other survivors and understand that I am not alone. By socializing with other survivors, I regained my confidence and positive outlook. I get treatment and physiotherapy ... [which] improved my health status. With [the] support of professional psychologists, art-therapists, and trainers I received knowledge on our rights and many other necessary information and skills. All this helped me to become [an] active member of society in general and in victim assistance ... Now I am advocating for disability rights, Oslo Action Plan, and for ratification of UNCRPD in Tajikistan. I am very grateful to Tajikistan National Mine Action Center and donors who are supporting TMAP.”

~ Sadafmo Davlatova, landmine survivor from Dashtijum Village, Shamsiddin Shohin district.
and communication skills. Team-building skills also improve through sports participation. As survivors see themselves growing stronger physically, they gain self-confidence and are motivated to become more self-reliant.

The results of art therapy and sports rehabilitation show that recovery is not just about regaining physical function—it is also about recovering from trauma emotionally and spiritually. With this holistic approach to rehabilitation, survivors can better understand who they are and how they fit within society. They become contributing members and no longer allow feelings of self-pity and loneliness to dictate their self-image.

Since 2014, summer rehabilitation workshops have been modified to include more training and advocacy components. This new format aims to further increase the skills and knowledge of mine survivors through training on leadership, team building, the independent living philosophy, human rights, and disability rights, including national and international legal instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

**History of Tajik Peer-to-Peer Support Programs and Psychosocial Support in Hospitals in Mine-affected Districts**

2011. Six Tajik survivors attended the Afghanistan Landmine Survivors Organization (ALSO) training on “Peer to Peer Support” in Kabul, Afghanistan. Before starting the pilot project, peer-to-peer support guidelines developed by ALSO were translated, adapted, and published by TNMAC. Funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and organized by TNMAC in cooperation with the Tajikistan Campaign to Ban Landmines and Cluster Munitions (TCBL&CM), the project was piloted during the joint summer rehabilitation workshop for Tajik and Afghan landmine survivors.

2012. With similarities between the Tajik and Afghan language and culture, in 2012, fifty landmine survivors from both countries received psychological rehabilitation and sports lessons for two weeks.

2013. The project was replicated and training occurred in regional centers in Khorog, Khujand, Rasht, and Bokhtar. Sixty-one landmine survivors and persons with disabilities were trained by Mr. Mahmadullo Davlatov, a professional psychologist who is a person with a disability himself. During the training, each participant received mobile phones and training packages, which included guidelines on peer-to-peer support, the referral system directory, and the Law on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities, etc.

2013–2014. Since 2012, the U.S. Department of State has supported the Tajikistan VA program to provide solutions and funding for physical accessibility issues and to build capacity for doctors and nurses in mine-affected areas, increasing psychological support to landmine survivors and persons with disabilities. This culminated with more than 200 doctors and nurses from trauma, surgery, and anesthesiology departments participating in a four-day capacity-building training9 conducted by the Psychological Support Center, which has experience in organizing psychosocial support activities in emergency situations.

Medical personnel from mine-affected districts received training on providing PFA support to patients with traumatic amputation of limbs, including landmine survivors. Trainings focused on providing psychological aid and psychosocial rehabilitation, enabling participants to assess the psychological status of persons with newly acquired disabilities. Additionally, trainings focused on advocacy and how to change societal attitudes, raise awareness, and create accessible spaces.

Within the first month of completion, 302 persons who underwent amputations, persons with disabilities, and patients who were in need of psychological support underwent rehabilitation with the techniques taught in the trainings.9

2018. A one-week certification training on psychosocial support in crisis situations was provided for local doctors from mine-affected areas, conducted by an international consultant in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population (MHSPP). The training focused on integrating mental health issues into primary healthcare in mine-affected districts to improve the effectiveness of psychosocial care for patients, including mine survivors.10

"I consider 'Peer-to-peer' support as a successful project because even survivors living in the remote rural areas can be heard and get assistance. Peer Helpers Network has been established after training and served as a 'Hot line.' The first few years after the training the participants liaised with the trainers for supervision, discussing difficult cases. [The] hot line allowed persons who need psychological support to contact peer helpers through mobile phones. [One of the challenges is that] this initiative was not further supported and we were not able to conduct refresh[er] training. However, even now, trained beneficiaries continue using mobile phones for provision of support. Especially during [the] pandemic period, I personally was in contact with mine/ERW survivors and provided psychological support based on the knowledge received during peer helpers training."

Umarbek Pulodov, ERW survivor. TCBL and CM Executive Director, 2009–2014
In addition to affecting the financial situation of mine survivors in Tajikistan, the pandemic also impacted their psychological well-being. Therefore, in March 2020, TNMAC developed a presentation devoted to the “Prevention of Infection and Psycho-social aspects of [the] COVID-19 pandemic.” The main objective was to address the predominant psychosocial consequences created by the pandemic relevant to HMA personnel, with a special focus on landmine survivors and persons with disabilities who may be disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Participants received general information on preventing infection as well as coping strategies and methods to improve their psycho-emotional well-being. They also learned relaxation and stress relief techniques.

A TNMAC VA officer conducted the first presentation for TNMAC’s partners: paramedics working for FSD, NPA, and the MoD. During the pandemic, this topic was included in the VA TWG meetings’ program conducted in Dushanbe and regional centers from 2020 to 2021. The VA TWG participants were landmine survivors, families of victims, representatives of the Tajikistan Red Crescent Society, local authorities, departments of social protection and disabled peoples’ organizations, relevant ministries, and the ICRC.

Throughout the pandemic, a TNMAC VA officer was in communication with landmine survivors to monitor their health and vaccination status. Additionally, in 2021, a blended approach for counseling sessions, which includes both digital and in-person sessions, was implemented.

TNMAC is planning to hold summer rehabilitation workshops in summer 2022 and will organize a post-COVID psychosocial assessment of survivors and families in Tajikistan. TNMAC is open to sharing its experiences in providing mental health rehabilitation and psychosocial support with HMA colleagues from other VA programs, and plans to continue these projects for many years to come.
4. Tajikistan's Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population (MHSPP), Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan, and donor support from the U.S. Department of State, United Nations Development Programme, Canadian Centre for Mine Action Technologies, etc.
6. From 2016-2017, participants received trainings from the Polus Center for Social and Economic Development, an international NGO with extensive experience with victim assistance in mine-affected countries.
7. For more information on the independent living philosophy, see: https://ncil.org/about/aboutil/.
8. Trainings were held in the Penjikent, Darvoz, Kulyab, Rasht Central District Hospitals, Khujand and Bokhtar Regional Clinical Hospitals, as well as in the Tajikistan National Medical Center in the capital, Dushanbe.
10. In 2018, a new project was organized using new certification training as a logical continuation of the previous project supported by the U.S. Department of State.
11. TNMAC used the UNDSS Critical Incident Stress Management Unit (CISMU) presentation “Psycho-social aspects of COVID-19 pandemic” in Tajikistan after its adaptation and translation into Tajik.