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The Tarter Regional Vocational Training Center

Recently, International Eurasia Press Fund helped to form the Tarter Regional Vocational Training Center to provide computer, business and vocational training for mine victims and their family members. The victims are also given medical and legal help by the Azerbaijan Mine Victims Association. The VTC and the AMVA both work to help war victims re integrate into society.

by Nick Nwohisa | International Eurasia Press Fund |

The Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action was established in 1998 and since then, has carried out mine-clearance operations and humanitarian support in several regions and communities in Azerbaijan. Beginning in 2009, the International Eurasia Press Fund joined ANAMA in conducting various surveys to determine the impact of landmines on Azerbaijani territory. The survey results indicated that mine victims predominantly resided in Agstafa, Fuzuli, Goranboy and Tarter.

In 2004, ANAMA worked with IEPF to conduct the Mine Victims Needs Assessment project. The project documented some of the challenges mine victims faced, such as:

- They were in urgent need of financial assistance.
- The families that had lost their bread-winners in the war needed assistance in establishing small-scale businesses to support themselves.
- Mine victims often faced legal challenges, particularly while trying to obtain their disabled status, citizenship registration card, etc.
- Both victims and people residing in mine-affected regions needed mine-risk education because accidents continued to occur due to lack of information.
- Mine victims, their families and the local population residing in mine-affected regions needed access to urgent medical attention following mine accidents.
- Mine victims required assistance in community and mainstream-society reintegration.

In order to help mine victims overcome some of these challenges, IEPF decided it should first bring the mine victims together through the creation of an association. This association would serve as a platform where different initiatives and programs related to victim assistance could be developed through ideas contributed by the mine victims themselves. Tarter was the first region identified for bringing together victims because of the high number of mine victims residing there. More than half of the Tarter region’s territory remains under Armenian occupation, and landmines and unexploded ordnance affect a large portion of the land.

Azerbaijan Mine Victims Association

The Azerbaijan Mine Victims Association was formally established and registered with the Azerbaijan government in May 2007. Through its various achievements, the AMVA Tarter branch was evaluated as a success by a committee within IEPF’s executive board, and was highlighted by several international and local news outlets. Some of the achievements from AMVA Tarter’s project activities were:

- More than 50 mine victims received assistance in various legal matters, such as changing their federal disability status so their pensions aligned with the severity of their injuries and documentating marital status to allow access to family benefits.
- 140 mine victims actively participated in various training courses on small-scale business management, computer literacy and first aid.
- Mine victims worked in various capacities in the regional IEPF offices.
- 27 mine victims received advanced medical diagnoses from specialists, which helped them access federal disability benefits.
- More than 30 mine victims received varying amounts of social assistance.

In 2008, based on AMVA Tarter’s success in assisting mine victims, the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), AMVAs original donor, financed the replication of similar actions in the Fuzuli and Agstafa regions, and assisted AMVA in Tarter with pursuing more activities.

Most of the AMVA-Tarter members joined the project working group, assisting mine victims with their legal issues and also providing courses in business training. Moreover, PM/WRA approved seed capital for providing microcredit loans to the mine victims. With this initial capital, the IEPF established the Avrasia-Kredit, Ltd., a non-banking organization distributing small loans to the less fortunate people in Agstafa, Fuzuli and Tarter. Additional financial donors, including CredAgro, AzerStar and AzerCredit, have increased the coffers of Avrasia-Kredit from an initial donation of US$45,000 to $600,000 recently, and Avrasia-Kredit is ranked among the top non-banking organizations allocating microcredit loans in the region, with more than 1,300 beneficiaries.

The mine victims who benefited from microcredit loans were mainly concerned with the expansion of their existing businesses, although some were interested in starting new businesses. IEPF and AMVA continued to provide business advice and entrepreneurial skills training to the mine victims and to a larger extent, the inhabitants of the communities in the regions. As the demand for microcredit swelled, a need to create a viable and sustainable source for job creation grew, hence, the IEPF programs-development team established the Tarter Regional Vocational Training Center.

The VTC was designed to not only help mine victims and their families gain the skills they needed to become self sufficient, but IEPF suggested retired mine-clearance workers were in need of retraining, as well. Due to the extremely stressful nature of their work, mine-clearance workers normally retire from their positions at approximately 45 years of age; however, the law does not regulate the retirement age. IEPF noticed that many demining retirees had a difficult time finding other work and becoming financially independent because of the difficulty in transferring their unique skills into other professions. Vocational training is needed to help them find employment in other fields and reintegrate into society. Consequently, deminers were encouraged to attend the training courses.

Training Center Goals and Strategies

On 30 March 2010, the VTC officially announced its opening. IEPF, in close collaboration with the Tarter region’s local municipalities, organized the ceremony, and many dignitaries attended, including PM/WRA’s Azerbaijan Country Program Manager, Katherine Baker, and Michael Gaunt, the military attaché for the U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan, along with a large number of community members. ANAMA’s Information Manager, Murad Rahimov, also attended the opening ceremony to express ANAMA’s desire to ensure mine-free zones in Azerbaijan’s border territories. During the ceremony, Vudadi Isayev, the head of the local authority, expressed his delight with the continuous financial support of the United States.

The Tarter Regional Vocational Training Center is unique, teaching food and nutrition skills, domestic skills such as painting, carpet weaving and decorative design, and tech-
nical skills like electrical wiring, carpentry, and advertising and graphic design. VTC also provides training on agricultural practices, business skills and microfinance management. The first participants were drawn from the Tarter region, but VTC expects others will come from the Agdam, Goranboy and Goygol regions. Presently, the two-story VTC building has various offices, restroom facilities and two training rooms that can seat up to 20 persons per room.

In the future, VTC will enroll war victims and retired deminers, irrespective of their locations. To accommodate the needs of these remote victims, VTC envisions having approximately six lodging rooms for participants and trainers from more distant regions of Azerbaijan, as well as a conference hall that can seat approximately 120 people.

As VTC’s main focus is providing participants with the skills to help them attain gainful employment, the VTC manager will closely collaborate with IEPF to find suitable places where the VTC graduates’ newly acquired skills will be needed. Some of the graduates will be encouraged to start their own small businesses or even joint ventures. Microcredit loans from Avrasya-Kredit are easily accessible to VTC graduates.

IEPF plans to expand and improve the VTC. Hopefully, international agencies and organizations will take advantage of the unique building housing the VTC. War victims, refugees, internally displaced people, local communities and deminers still need assistance. The VTC is a collective community resource, functioning to benefit the general public. In addition, VTC plans to diversify to also include the promotion of agricultural practices as one of its core activities, since this is the primary trade of the region’s inhabitants. Although VTC has taught agricultural classes for quite some time, it plans to extend the training program to its commercial farm and provide on-the-job training for mine victims and their family members.

IEPF Chairman Umud Mirzayev and the project working group meet with staff of the Tarter Regional Vocational Training Center.

One of the participants in the carpet weaving class displays her skills on knitting.