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Uzbekistan Ammunition Depot Explosion Cleanup: U.S. DoD Support

A recent ammunition explosion in Kagan, Uzbekistan, prompted an appeal for international aid. As a result, Lieutenant Colonel Gary Bolos led a team of Explosive Ordinance Disposal Non-Commissioned Officers from the United States Department of Defense into Uzbekistan to deliver equipment and train the Uzbek Army on proper detection and removal of the ammunition with a limited budget and restricted schedule.

by Matthew Vosej (Center for International Stabilization and Recovery)

On 21 July 2008, U.S. Department of State representatives in Uzbekistan, a former Soviet satellite nation located within Central Asia, contacted U.S. Army Central Command, the Army Service Component of Central Command. USARCENT received an e-mail including an itemized request from the Uzbekistan Ministry of Defense for three types of equipment: landmine detectors, underwa- ter metal detectors and bomb suits.1

Two weeks prior, on 10 July 2008, two explosions at an Uzbek Army base and ammunition depot had caused 150 million rounds of various ammunition to scatter over an eight-mile radius (12 kilometers) from the epicenter of the blast.2 The ammunition depot was located outside the city of Bukhara in the small town of Kagan. Bukhara, which was located along the historically significant Silk Road during ancient times, was once one of the largest commercial centers not only in Central Asia, but in the world.3

Government Response

In order to control the situation, the government of Uzbekistan de- clared that the incident was indeed a “disaster,” thus giving it grounds to appeal for foreign aid. With that, the Uzbek Ministry of Defense looked to the U.S. Department of State for help. Uzbekistan requested U.S. as- sistance in obtaining adequate equipment and the necessary training to dispose of the massive amounts of unexploded ordnance that contain- ed the depot. The Department of State, in conjunction with its em- bassy in Uzbekistan, contacted the U.S. Department of Defense to assist in obtaining the equipment and training. USARCENT was given full responsibility for the mission, including the delivery of 200 landmine detectors, 20 underwater detectors and 20 bomb suits to the Uzbek Min- istry of Defense.4 In addition to the equipment, USARCENT was tasked with providing requisite training on the equipment for Uzbek military personnel to enable them to deal with their newfound UXO situation. This entire operation was carried out under the direction and supervi- sion of Lieutenant Colonel Gary Bolos.

Bolos, a survivor of 23 years and an Army EOD Officer since 1980, was on site in the town of Kagan by early August with ARCENT Country Desk Officer Central Asia/South Asia Branch Chief LTC Mark Derber. “[The weapons are not stored properly],” says Bolos. “There is a lot of open storage — in that region, you can come from extremely cold to pretty hot [quickly] you have your extremes in weather. Anytime a change of weather is occurring dramatically, it’s going to [shift] into an unstable form. Then you’re dealing with a lot of unstable munitions.”

Challenges of Operation

The training that Bolos and his team delivered to the group of 300 Uzbek soldiers initially seemed like a huge challenge. In fact, while on the Pre-Deployment site survey, Bolos was not allowed access into the military depot, but relegated to the outside of the perimeter. This restriction made it hard for him to assess the degree of damage caused by the explosion and to find inactive munitions to familiarize the trainees with the metal detectors. Instead, Bolos and his team tried to find examples of the UXO found near the explosion site. “I was able to capture some of the munitions that were scat- tered among the outside of the perimeter, so I could see what they were looking for.” He then asked the Uzbeks to provide samples of the munitions involved in the explo- sion to allow his team to demonstrate how the detectors would work.

Another challenge the team faced was the language barrier. According to Bolos, he had requested the assistance of a Russian interpreter, which seemed like a good choice considering that Uzbekistan was under Russian and then Soviet control for more than a century, but unfortunately this did not work as well as he expected. “We discovered it’s better to have a person with an Uzbek dialect that speaks Uzbekistan versus Rus- sian because some of the younger generation didn’t understand Russian,” he remarked. “We were fortunate [that] one of our interpreters spoke the Uzbek language. He did the majority of our translations.”

Probably the largest obstacle facing Bolos and his team was one outside of his con- trol time. This impediment was mostly due to the fact that the visas allowing them to stay in the country expired between 30 August and 1 September. Considering that the team arrived with the equipment on 21 August, their available time frame to fully train more than 300 Uzbek soldiers was just seven days.5 As if that weren’t difficult enough, the team also had to find a classroom that could accommodate 30 or more personnel and had electricity for a laptop and proxy, locate an area large enough to construct 10 metal-detector practice field lanes, and identify various-sized fragments of UXO to use as training aids.

Training the Trainer

With that in mind, Bolos formulated a strategy that would keep the training on schedule. “We used a three-pronged approach,” Bolos says. “First, instructions were
given in the [following] in a classroom envi-
ronment teaching them assembly and basic
characteristics of the landmine and underwa-
ter detectors. Second, we had [that] of them assemble [and] functions-check [the detec-
tors], and [then] sent [them] through a prac-
tice walk-through lane with burst, but not, UXO. Third, we identified the more experi-
enced soldiers and [then] encouraged and al-
lowed them in using their own soldiers pro-
perly trained and comfortable with the new equipment we provided. “With this ‘train
the trainers’ technique and methodology, Bolos and his crew effectively trained all of the Uzbek
soldiers. They knew exactly the small run-through of all the information they
had learned quickly. “It was very easy work-
ing with them.”

Conclusion

Bolos was also impressed by the level of professionalism the Uzbek personnel showed. They “formed a specialist engineer staff unit for this,” they said. “They were all engaging, they were familiar with some of the equipment and they [were] very professional. “[They learned quickly.] It was very easy work-
ing with them.”

Ultimately, Bolos and his team had a considerable impact on the Uzbek soldiers. Through training personnel how to perform EOD operations, the U.S. has provided Uzbekistan with a sustainable method for performing with them.”

The first key component of the GICHD’s Fran-
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The GICHD is also continuing research into various technical survey methods, and this information will be published later in 2009. In conjunction with this, the GICHD has provided practical advice and assistance to mine affected countries in the development of land release policies and processes. These have included, among others, Angola, Camb-
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See Endnotes, Page 134

Fadila Bouzid

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