Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 11
Issue 2 The Journal of Mine Action

April 2008

Tajikistan

Country Profile
CISR

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Tajikistan
by Geary Cox
[ Mine Action Information Center ]

Near the end of a decade-waged civil war ravaged the Republic of Tajikistan, the country is still suffering the effects of contamination from landmines and explosive remnants of war. Although the country has never produced or exported anti-personnel mines, Soviet and Uzbek forces emplaced them along most of its borders. Tajikistan is also the only State Party to the Ottawa Convention to declare APMs stockpiled in its territory by a non-State Party, Russian Ministry of Defense units deployed in Tajikistan control approximately 18,200 mines. All of these issues contribute to a crippling mine problem for one of the poorest countries in the world.

MINE CONTAMINATION

The Tajikistan Mine Action Centre, the national executive body for mine action, was established on 31 May 2003. Tajikistan has approximately 25 square kilometers of landmines are contaminated (9.6 square miles). Contamination from the 1992–97 civil war is concentrated in central and western areas of the country as both sides in the conflict used mines. Soviet forces emplaced and maintained landmines along the Tajik-Afghan border and Uzbek forces deployed mines along the Tajik-Uzbek border. Both countries were active in laying landmines with the intent to stop cross-border infiltration.

Parviz Mavlonkulov, TMAC Operations Manager, says the contamination along the border with Uzbekistan is especially problematic because both countries contest the actual location of the border. Landmine Survivors Network reports the last mines were laid along the border by Uzbek forces as recently as 2000. Mavlonkulov, in a presentation to the United Nations Development Programme Senior Managers Conference held at James Madison University in 2007, stated, “We don’t get any cooperation from Uzbekistan... They even mined our land.”

TMAC has not recorded records for landmine emplacement from Uzbek authorities. Only Afghanistan has released landmine documentation.

Compounding the problem with mines and disputed borders is the prevalence of other explosive remnants of war, which has been addressed by the Explosive Demolition Centre, created by the government of Tajikistan and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The EDC overcame the destruction of more than 77 tons of ERW by 19 October 2006, much of which was small arms and light weapons.

IMPACT OF MINES AND ERW

Mavlonkulov says 325 mine deaths and 362 mine victims have been reported since 1992. Of these, children constitute about 20 percent and women 10 percent. TMAC reports that most casualties are civilians engaged in income-generating activities entailing agriculture, animal grazing or wood collection. It is difficult to ascertain the total number of civilians affected by mines and ERW because there is no national data-collection mechanism in Tajikistan. Authorities must rely on healthcare providers and other means of data collection, but they estimate a 15 to 20 percent under-collection of information.

Aside from the impact to the populace, landmines present a unique problem due to the arable land, due to its scarcity, is placed at a premium for the Tajik government. Mavlonkulov says the contamination of one of the poorest countries in the world is very difficult for our minefields in the mountains.”

Clearance Operations

Tajikistan acceded to the Ottawa Convention 12 October 1999, and the Convention entered into force for the country 1 April 2000. The Tajik government did not implement new domestic legislation to enumerate the ban on mine production, and national laws still do not exist as of 2007.

The deadline for total landmine clearance in Tajikistan is 1 April 2010, but, as Mavlonkulov concedes, “The country is not a sufficient time to complete all Convention obligations, but has already been submerged due to a lack of support from other States Parties.” TMAC serves as the coordinating authority for the Commission on the Implementation of International Humanitarian Law, an inter-ministerial body that oversees mine action in Tajikistan. The Landmine Monitor Report notes that TMAC, established in June 2003, receives assistance from the United Nations Development Programme Technical Advisor. The Foundation Suisse de Déminage provided national capacity-building services and managed mine-action operations; TMAC will assume responsibility for management in 2008.

The Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan implemented a small-scale limited-enterprise program to deliver breeding pairs of sheep and goats to landmine survivors. This important income-generation program has helped more than 72 families in six districts.

MINE-RISK EDUCATION

In 2004, TMAC and the UNICEF Office of the Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, implemented a mine-risk education project in seven districts of Tajikistan. The project taught about 15,000 children in 50 schools, LARM states. The IRM is important, Mavlonkulov says, because TMAC has placed more than 2,000 warning signs around suspected contaminated areas, but, without sufficient education, the populace may not comprehend or heed the signs.

Additional efforts have included child-survivor summer camps, supervised by TMAC, and the construction of tight fenced playgrounds in four border districts with Uzbekistan, completed by the Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan.

Conclusion

The future for Tajikistan depends greatly on its ability to overcome the landmine situation with which it has been saddled due to years of conflicts and disputes. TMAC and the Tajik government have laid out important strategic plans for the future, but even the most unassuming plans require stronger support from international donors. The problem of landmines and other explosive remnants of war is a politically sensitive issue, one that threatens to hinder development in one of the poorest countries of the world. Increased donations and support from the international community can match Tajikistan’s commitment to landmine eradication, the country will be poised for success.