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Jernej Cimperšek
Permanent Mission of Slovenia to the OSCE

Iztok Hočevar
International Trust Fund

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Regional Mine Action as a Confidence-building Measure

The mine-action cooperation through regional workshops described in this article tested the effectiveness of this cooperation as a confidence-building measure among neighbouring states and former combatants.

by Jemila Cimperšek | Permanent Mission of Slovenia to the OSCE | and Iztok Hočevar | International Trust Fund

Mines represent one of the most significant security, humanitarian, environmental, economic and development problems of the international community. Areas covered with mines directly and indirectly impact a community. Mined areas potentially manifest themselves in a large number of civilian casualties and influence the population’s health in terms of losses in livestock, arable land, supplies, production and trade. Civilians have a constant fear and a feeling of animosity, distrust and intolerance as a result of mines.

Developing a Regional Approach

A regional approach to mine action has been slowly growing in southeastern Europe and the southern Caucasus. Slovenia, through the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance, has been actively involved in mine-action activities in southeastern Europe since 1998, using a regional approach. Then, in November 2003, three national mine-action centres (Albania, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the ITF established the South-Eastern Europe Mine Action Coordination Council, a technical body whose goal is a southeastern Europe free of mines. By 2004 other countries, including Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania and Macedonia, from the region joined the initiative and started to cooperate on joint regional projects as well as on the exchange of knowledge, technologies and equipment. Being a technical body, SEEMACC is providing an arena for countries in the region to discuss solutions to the landmine problem, one of the major factors preventing normal socioeconomic development in affected countries.

With good regional cooperation and proposed joint projects, affected countries managed to attract additional donor support, which is necessary in order to achieve the common goal—a mine-free region by the end of the decade. Similar initiatives should be started in other mine-affected regions to enhance confidence building and strengthen cooperation and trust among neighbouring countries.

To speed the pace of reducing the landmine threat that endangers populations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and to strengthen confidence and security in the southern Caucasus, in 2004–2005 the U.S. Department of State implemented the “Reconnect Initiative,” an innovative multilateral program. Under this initiative, U.S. military personnel conducted joint humanitarian demining training of select groups of Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers and civilians. The government of Georgia hosted this training program at the Gori military base near Tbilisi, Georgia. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan each contributed 20 soldiers and civilians (for a total of 60 students) to be educated about modern humanitarian demining techniques by U.S. Army demining experts.

Regional Workshops Begin

The second initiative was the successful implementation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Cooperation and Capacity Building Seminar, held 1–2 October 2002, in Yerevan, Armenia, and co-chaired by the Armenian and Canadian governments. Here all countries of the region expressed consensus in suggesting the need for landmines to become a depoliticized issue and the need for a common strategy to approach local concerns.

The ITF continued promoting regional cooperation, incorporating observations from this first OSCE seminar. The result was the first Regional Management Training for Middle Managers of the Mine Action Program. This training of managers included participants from all countries of the region, improving their knowledge in mine-action management. Even more importantly, it established relations and raised confidence among participants. In concluding lectures, participants realized and suggested several points of possible cooperation on the regional level. This included joint training, cross-border mine-action projects, sharing of equipment, etc.

The Slovenian experience with SEEMACC managed to depoliticize the mine-action issue, establish a firm dialogue among members and stimulate joint cooperation. Slovenia sincerely believes regional cooperation and confidence building can be achieved to a significant extent through mine action and can also lead to other implementations of aid throughout the country, i.e., reconstruction of infrastructure. When countries start to cooperate after the war, they are much more attractive for donors in all other fields.

Workshop in Tbilisi

On 5–6 October 2005, the OSCE sponsored a regional workshop in Tbilisi, Georgia, with the intention of establishing the proper environment for dialogue among the nations of the South Caucasus and central Asian regions. The workshop focused on “Confidence Building and Regional Cooperation through Mine Action.” Previously, cooperation in the region has been limited to some attempts at joint training. This workshop was organized by the OSCE Centre in Tbilisi and the ITF, and was sponsored by Canada, the Netherlands, Slovenia and OSCE. The specific objectives of the workshop were to create an open exchange of information on the issue of landmines and to promote successful models of regional cooperation for countries in the southern Caucasus and central Asian regions. The workshop contributed to confidence building among nations and the possibility of accession to the AP Landmine Ban Convention by non-signatory states from the respective regions.

The workshop was also an occasion for the OSCE to examine how mine-action activities could improve the overall socioeconomic situation in the regions, complement OSCE core activities and, therefore, strengthen the OSCE’s advocacy role in the respective regions.

A secondary goal of the workshop involved starting discussions among responsible authorities in the respective regions that would ultimately lead to the eradication of mines and an improved socioeconomic situation in each region, contributing to better dialogue and cooperation among nations.

This workshop gathered over 80 military and diplomatic representatives from countries of the South Caucasus area, central Asia, Canada, Europe and the United States. Representatives from the European Commission attended, along with the OSCE, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, Geneva Call, Landmine Survivors Network, the Slovenian Institute for Rehabilitation and various local embassies and non-governmental organizations.

At the workshop, several examples of confidence building and regional cooperation in other mine-affected regions were presented, which formed the basis for discussion on how regional cooperation might be achieved. For example, in the first part of the workshop,
Demining of Underground Adits in Ukraine

During World War II the Soviet Union established ammunition depots with over 10,000 metric tons (11,023 U.S. tons) of explosives around the Ukrainian towns of Sevastopol and Kerch. Stored in adits, these explosives threaten the peaceful lives of present-day Ukrainians. In 2002, teams began the task of removing unexploded ordnance, landmines and debris. They encountered many problems while pursuing their goal of eliminating these stockpiles by 2010. Their efforts are described in this article.

by Yuri Kolansky (Ukroboronservice State Company)

A simple conclusion can be drawn from the Tbilisi workshop: Demining is considered a complementary activity of the OSCE, not a central one. However, since demining is a complementary activity of the OSCE, it is considered a non-essential activity.

The Tbilisi workshop ended with a roundtable discussion in which participants discussed possible next steps in mine action. The following cooperation was suggested:

• Continuation of joint training
• Cooperation in mine-victim assistance
• Encouragement to announce a moratorium on the use, production and transfer of anti-personnel landmines
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