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Knights in Armored Vehicles

The HALO Trust in the Caucasus

by Richard Boulter

The demise of the Soviet Union and the resultant rush to establish claims over disputed areas and to assert ethnic identity led to a widespread call to arms. Nowhere was this more the case than in the Caucasus. The former southern Caucasian "soviets" of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia have all asserted their independence from Russia and all have witnessed bloodshed resulting from inter-ethnic fighting. In the north Caucasus there has been fighting in Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia and most notably in Chechnya. The virtual abandonment of former weapons stockpiles accompanied by some very definite mischief by the departing Russian troops has led to munitions, including mines falling into the hands of almost every potential warring faction. To have led to munitions, including mines falling into the hands of almost every potential warring faction. To

Ten years after the Soviet Union was disbanded, some semblance of order is now emerging in the region and the process of mine clearance is well under way. The HALO Trust began its mine clearance work in January 1995 with a training program in Nagorno Karabakh. The program, which had an initial expiration date for 18 months, aimed to establish an indigenous mine action capacity that could carry on the work once international support was withdrawn. This was then followed by mine clearance programs in Abkhazia (Georgia) and in Chechnya. In each of these places in the Caucasus, HALO has been the sole mine clearance operator, which has led to HALO taking the lead in other areas such as mine awareness and in establishing mine information centers.

Each of the programs is now described in some detail to give the reader a broader perspective of the particular challenges and rewards that the Caucasus present.

Nagorno Karabakh

Despite longstanding historical claims and being largely populated by Armenian speaking Christians, in 1923 Stalin decreed that Nagorno Karabakh would become a part of Muslim Azerbaijan. The Armenians contested this resolution throughout the 65 years of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast's existence. In 1988 following the submission of an 80,000 name petition, the Oblast Soviet of the NKAO appealed to the Supreme Soviets of the USSR, Azerbaijan and Armenia to allow them to secede from Azerbaijan and be attached to Armenia. Baku rejected the appeal and shortly afterwards violence broke out, initially in the form of a riot on the streets of an Azeri town, but the deaths of two Azeris in the riot led to a pogrom. The situation deteriorated until July 12, 1988, when the NKAO Oblast

Soviet took the decision to leave Azerbaijan and join Armenia. Soviet troops were deployed to Karabakh to suppress nationalist sentiments, which they managed to do until 1991. When the Soviet Union broke up, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh all declared their independence and held elections. At this point the Azeri Soviet began its attempt to reestablish control over Karabakh and between 1992 and May 1994 fierce fighting claimed around 46,000 lives. The fighting involved extensive use of armor, artillery and aircraft, as well as the laying of many barrier mine fields. Aerial sub-munitions were dropped across the entire region and are still uncovered on a regular basis.

In May 1994, a cease fire was brokered which was confirmed in writing by Armenia and Azerbaijan in July 1994, six months later The HALO Trust commenced its mine clearance program in Karabakh. HALO opted to work with the Karabakh military Engineering Service as they were already engaged in mine clearance work. This department provided the best hope of the work continuing after HALO departed.
Action Center will continue to collate and disseminate information, to provide equipment and technical support and to direct and coordinate mine clearance and UXO work in much the same fashion as any other MAC aims to do, the difference in Karabakh is that it all happens at rates which the host government has been able to sustain.

Abkhazia

Abkhazia is a secessionist republic that lies along the eastern shore of the Black Sea. The Abkhaz fought an 18-month war with Georgia in 1992-93, that saw heavy fighting and the widespread use of mines. Since the conventional fighting ended, limited partisan activity has continued especially in the southernmost Abkhaz region of Gali. Mines can be found throughout southern and central Abkhaz but the major concentrations were laid in Sukhumi (the modern day Abkhaz capital) along the south bank of the Gumista River (the Georgian forces’ northern front through most of the war). Mines were also placed on the north bank of the Inguri River (the present de facto frontier and Abkhaz forces southern front since the end of the fighting) and along the M27 corridor, the Main Supply Route for the Georgians during the war. The HALO Trust began their clearance program in Abkhazia in November 1997. This was achieved only after many months of negotiations. Mine clearance has been conducted by both manual and mechanical means. The mechanical clearance is being conducted using specially modified Medium-Wheeled Loaders which were a gift from the British Government’s Ministry of Defence. HALO’s specialist technicians have trained local EOD personnel to efficiently use specialized tools such as rocket wrenches and de-armorers which have allowed them to deal with all items of ordnance used in the Abkhaz conflict, the largest of which were 500kg air-dropped bombs. The team have now asked by the Abkhaz authorities to deal with a stock of SA2 missiles and the disposal of these large items will commence shortly.

Clearance in Abkhazia has benefited enormously through the provision of mine maps at the time of the conflict which have been given to HALO by the former combatants. Many of these maps are of exceptionally good quality and give a very clear indication of where to start looking and what to expect to find. The maps also give an indication of the scale of the problem throughout the country. For example, the maps indicate that only around 5,500 mines were laid along the main Georgian front line, and overall indicate that the total figure for mines used lies somewhere in the range of 15-30,000. This is still a lot of mines but a long way short of the figure of 1 million that was proclaimed by several leading international agencies in the mid-1990s.

The mine clearance teams in Abkhazia have so far concentrated on the clearance of the mine concentrations in Sukhumi and Gali. HALO expects to finish the Sukhumi (Gumista River) clearance work this year, but the occasional use of anti-vehicle mines on routes away from the major highways has hindered clearance in Gali. HALO is planning to commence a new U.S. Government-funded clearance program in the Ochamchire region of Abkhazia. HALO believes that all the mines in peaceful Abkhazia can be cleared within five years, but the full clearance of the Gali region will not take place until a lasting peace settlement has been agreed upon.

Chechnya

Recently in the forefront of the news, Chechnya had been home to a HALO Trust mine clearance program since 1996. By the time of the recent Russian invasion, HALO had established both manual and mechanical mine-clearance teams, trained a UXO capacity and had conducted a full survey of the entire republic. HALO had based its operation in the south-west of Chechnya, scene to much of the fighting and relatively far more secure than Grozny. HALO was in the final steps of the hand-over of full management responsibility to Chechen personnel when the present fighting broke out.

The recent fighting has caused HALO to suspend its activities but should the Chechens achieve a settlement, there is every likelihood that HALO will return immediately to carry out the much needed emergency work. Indeed, HALO kept personnel in Chechnya for as long as was thought reasonably safe to do so, with the last clearance work of hazardous ordnance taking place as recently as December 1999. For most of 1998 and the first half of 1999 HALO was the only international agency with a permanent presence in Chechnya and so became a much valued employer. The respect for the nature of the work undertaken, afforded some measure of security for the expatriate personnel. HALO found far fewer mines in Chechnya than in other regions in the Caucasus, the typical Russian unit would post a couple of OPMs having fragmentation mines around a road checkpoint to deter would-be aggressors, but very few barrier mine fields were laid. As for the Chechens, they were too poorly equipped to lay major mine fields but they did make good use of the resources they had and mines very much played a part in their tactics. Despite low mine numbers overall, the perceived threat of mines, based largely on a history of accidents around Chechnya, did deny vast tracts of agricultural land and destroy a significant proportion of the working tractors that still operated in Chechnya. To help address this problem of low mine numbers over vast areas, HALO deployed Pearson rollers pushed by a Belarussian locally manufactured tractor, which HALO had armed in the United Kingdom. The tractor/roller combination proved a great success and large tracts of agricultural land were quickly returned to productive use. HALO also deployed Volvo Medium Wheeled Loaders to Chechnya to clear the unexploded ordnance that lay buried in the rubble of former housing.

The recent conflict has almost certainly seen the deployment of additional mines and unexploded ordnance. Just how the Russians have deployed these mines is yet to be seen, however they did drop PEMs over the Georgian border area of Omalo last summer, so there is little doubt that they will have shown much reserve in Chechnya.

In the Caucasus, HALO has shown that wherever there is a well-educated, computer literate local population, it is possible to quickly and efficiently establish an effective and appropriate Mines Action Center at costs that can be sustained by the governments of mine-affected countries.

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Am anti-tank mine counting detonator in Chechnya and a 10K air-dropped bomb in Abkhazia. The locals had attempted to destroy the bomb by shooting it.

Photo via HALO Trust

An armoured Belarussian tractor fitted with Pearson Mine Roller which HALO used in Abkhazia and Chechnya conducts a mine reduction.

Photo via HALO Trust

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Focus

A map of a UXO survey in Sinai, Egypt showing the location and extent of UXO contamination. The survey was conducted as part of an agreement between the British and Egyptian governments to clear UXO in Sinai as part of an overall treaty to ensure peace in the Sinai, Egypt. The survey was managed by the British Government’s Ministry of Defence and all surveyors were trained by the HALO Trust.

Photo via HALO Trust

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