

August 2005

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Recommended Citation

Jalalov, Musa and Sadigov, Vagif (2005) "Mine Risk Education in Azerbaijan," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 30.
Available at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol9/iss1/30>

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MINE RISK EDUCATION in Azerbaijan



by Musa Jalalov and Vagif Sadigov | Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action |

Mine risk education (MRE) is considered to be one of the key components of mine action throughout the world. It is the first step in reducing mine/UXO injury and death rates through dissemination of safe-behavior messages and rules among the population in contaminated and near-by areas. According to the Azerbaijan Mine Action Programme, MRE should be supported by and integrated with other forthcoming mine-related activities in Azerbaijan. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) MRE program in Azerbaijan is funded by the U.S. Department of State. It has been implemented and coordinated in close cooperation with the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) since 2000. As a result of that program, the general interest and positive attitude of local people towards MRE have significantly increased. Even children have become more sensitive and have started reporting to local authorities any dangerous items they encounter.

ANAMA's implementing partners have become more interested in including MRE in their general activity plans for the mine/UXO hazardous areas of Azerbaijan. The main assumption is the mine/UXO problem will last for a long time in Azerbaijan. It should be mentioned that in less than two years' time, UNICEF and ANAMA were able to create a national capacity, which proved to be a strong basis for performing future MRE activities. Sustainable development of ANAMA's MRE capacity was also possible because of special interest expressed by donor countries and agencies.

Upon completion of the Landmine Impact Survey (LIS) in 2003, the newly formed MRE Section of ANAMA determined its strategic priorities and began to benefit from recommendations and experiences. The lack of funding during 2003 affected MRE project implementation in all targeted districts. Therefore, it was only possible to perform some limited activities together with

U.S. European Command (US EUCOM) specialists. Today, the MRE team is implementing activities in two main directions—namely the establishment and integration of MRE in the community.

Establishing Community-Based MRE Committees in Targeted Villages

ANAMA MRE specialists considered establishing an appropriate MRE structure that is relevant to the needs of population. MRE activity is voluntarily performed by the villagers, who report to a district coordinator on a monthly basis. The MRE team has tried to implement community-oriented activities since 2003 through joint trainings held with US EUCOM, after which it became possible to conduct a special session for a group of employees representing demining organizations. During July and August, ANAMA MRE officers together with four American instructors established the foundation for community-based activities. In the beginning, only 13 MRE committees were established in villages near landmines and in internally displaced person camps. The idea of building community groups was welcomed by the locals; they expressed their willingness to support MRE for the population of their villages.

MRE was officially included as a *sine qua non*—essential—condition in the activity plans' of ANAMA and its implementing partners in 2003.¹ Mine/UXO safety rules as well as the indicators of dan-

gerous areas are regularly discussed during technical survey and clearance operations. They are also discussed when handing over cleared areas to their owners and when visiting mine victims. During bad weather conditions, deminers disseminate MRE for locals. ANAMA quality assurance team officers did much in this respect, and they conducted many MRE workshops in targeted communities.

The Azerbaijan Mined Area Indicators Pack developed by Golden West Humanitarian Foundation (financially supported by the U.S. Department of State) and Colin King Associates of Great Britain became an invaluable manual in MRE activity. Within a year, the MRE team was able to conduct some refresher training sessions for deminers, operational and support personnel from regional offices, national non-governmental organizations, and the International Eurasia Press

US EUCOM official visits an MRE training session to oversee the progress of the program.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MUSA JALALOV AND VAGIF SADIGOV

Fund (IEPF). The MRE team has established close collaboration with Republic Children Organization and other children groups like Shafa, Nur and Reliable Future. Establishment of combat boot MRE committees in the districts covered by the LIS successfully continued in 2004 as well. A joint training for 20 community-based (CB) MRE coordinators was conducted together with US EUCOM experts July 13–16, 2004, at the ANAMA Regional Training Center in Khanlar district. All participants were from front-line District Executive Authorities (chiefs of Civil Defense Headquarters) who participated in a four-day training session and received certificates at the graduation ceremony. Thus, 59 MRE committees have already been established in three targeted districts (Terter, Khanlar and Aghdam).

Based on request from British Petroleum, the ANAMA MRE team conducted six training sessions for Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline staff and other employees in Tovuz and Yevlakh camps. MRE sessions for the employees of the United Nations and other international relief agencies working in Azerbaijan continued during the year. MRE training sessions were also held by Relief Azerbaijan (12), IEPF (eight) and ANAMA Quality Assurance (QA) Team members (three) in 88 villages of frontline districts, where a total of 27,607 people participated. Different types of new MRE materials—posters, stickers, exercise books, pens, etc.—were produced in 2004. A total of 13,446 items has already been distributed. Also, MRE billboards and road signs are considered great mass-outreach means. The MRE Team set up 82 billboards and 15 road signs in 54 mine-/UXO-contaminated villages of nine frontline districts.

Integration of MRE Into School Curricula

The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by the Ministry of Education (MoE), UNICEF and ANAMA on May 11, 2004, in Baku is considered an important event in the history of Azerbaijan's mine action. A project plan on integrating MRE into the curriculum of schools in targeted districts was made and is being funded by UNICEF. A Methodical Board (MB) formed of MoE and ANAMA MRE Section officers started to function right after the signing process. During their first meeting, members of the MB discussed preparing MRE textbooks for schoolchildren and manuals for teachers. The names and number of schools, students and teachers were identified afterwards.

ANAMA/UNICEF instructors were invited to conduct 30 training sessions for 602 teachers in

12 districts. At the end of December, a group of 15 coordinators from 13 District Education Departments participated in a four-day training session, and all trainees received certificates upon completion. Meanwhile, the work on preparing textbooks for students and manuals for teachers continued, and the drafts of textbooks and manuals were reviewed and approved by all three sides involved.

The MoE submitted the list of targeted schools located along the frontline and on the border, including the number of students and teachers. The project targeted 13 frontline District Education Departments, which covered 305 schools. The MoE approved MRE lessons during the 2004/2005 school year for fourth- and sixth-grade schoolchildren only. Six hundred



The Methodical Board discussing future MRE outreach textbooks to be used to educate students living in mine-vulnerable areas.

teachers were selected for MRE training, but the number of students in the two grades has reached about 15,000, meaning there may still be a shortage of teachers. Also, 700 manuals for teachers and 15,000 textbooks for students have already been produced and distributed to education departments. Six hundred teachers are conducting MRE classes in 13 target-district secondary schools, which means the overall share and role of the Azerbaijan government in mine action has increased. The salary of teachers for MRE classes is paid by the government of Azerbaijan from the budget of local education departments.

MRE-related goals should continue as long as the threat exists and, therefore, it is critical to provide a continuous cycle of MRE. MRE is of high priority for a substantial reduction of mine casualties—the maimed and deceased as well as the loss of property. As a result, the ANAMA MRE team put the following objectives forward for implementation in 2005:

- Coordinating MRE activities in mine-/UXO-affected areas
- Ensuring MRE activities for existing commu-

nity groups and establishing new CB MRE committees

- Monitoring MRE classes in schools
- Evaluating MRE materials distributed already
- Developing and distributing the new print and electronic materials
- Providing rapid MRE activities for emergency cases of mine/UXO incidents

Joint activities of various governmental and non-governmental entities are planned within the MRE Working Group. Development of CB MRE projects, identification of implementing agencies and promotion of projects will be a main direction of activity. Further coordination also presupposes development of an MRE capacity for organizations active in affected areas. LIS results and recent data on mine/UXO impact on communities (devices, victims and blockages) will be extensively used to prioritize activities in establishing community MRE groups, to ensure sustainability, and to further develop the local capacity with these groups.

To ensure the quality of MRE classes in schools after the inclusion of it into school curricula, it is important to perform regular monitoring visits to schools in war-torn areas and to continue joint activities within the MB established before. Materials developed in previous years for schools and community MRE groups and installed independently in affected areas (billboards and road signs) will be evaluated. The need for new types of MRE materials will be studied and identified as well. Also, the conclusions and recommendations developed dur-

ing the evaluation stage will be taken into consideration in developing and distributing the new print and electronic materials. ♦

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