



Armenian terror

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THE PROBLEM OF LANDMINES and UXO in the liberated territories





Azerbaijan is counted among countries affected by landmines in the world, still haunted to this day by the legacy of a war. The remnants of war in Azerbaijan, particularly the pervasive issue of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), pose significant threats to civilian safety, ecological health, and economic recovery. According to the Landmine Monitor Report 2020, project by International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munitions Coalition (ICBL-CMC), Azerbaijan is among the top 10 countries in the world in terms of the scale of contamination (excluding findings after the second post-war situation in the end of 2020). This challenge is especially pronounced in the liberated territories following the Trilateral Statement signed by the heads of state of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia on 10 November 2020. The presence of landmines not only endangers lives but also complicates humanitarian efforts, making the path to rehabilitation and development fraught with obstacles.

After the Patriotic War, it became evident that more than 12 percent of the territory of Azerbaijan was contaminated with landmines. Azerbaijan is sadly among the top 5 most heavily mine-contaminated countries in the world with 1.5 million landmines planted. 1,166,702 ha of territory that were liberated is expected to contain

landmines. Of this, 211,800 ha are of high and 954,902 ha of medium and low contamination level. "Preliminary mine experts' data shared with International Crisis Group classify nearly a fifth of the regained territory as highly contaminated and around two thirds of it as a priority area for humanitarian demining".

During the monitoring by the Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines (AzCBL) and demining operations have revealed significant contamination of the former contact line and surrounding areas, including gardens, forests, vineyards, destroyed settlements, cemeteries, and riverbanks, with landmines. These hazardous devices have also been found in and around agricultural fields, pastures, along roads, bridges, schools, and near water sources. During monitoring by the AzCBL also it was reported that mine explosions in cemeteries within the Aghdam and Lachin regions resulted in the tragic deaths of three individuals and injuries to four others, highlighting the persistent danger posed by landmines and unexploded ordnance in these areas.

After significant international pressure, Armenia transferred mine maps to Azerbaijan in three stages. Initially, maps indicating 97,000 mines in the Aghdam region were provided, followed by 92,000 mines in the Fuzuli and Zangilan regions, and finally, maps of other



liberated areas. Current estimates suggest that 390,709 landmines are located along the former contact line based on these maps. However, on-site verifications revealed that the accuracy of these mine maps is only about 25%, with the efficiency of recorded minefields at a mere 2%. The map covering the contact line through the Khojavand, Terter, and Goranboy regions was not submitted at all. On 25 January 2024, Armenian media announced that the National Security Service of Armenia was set to provide Azerbaijan with eight new mine maps. The Mine Action Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (ANAMA) confirmed that Armenia submitted eight military formularies of mined areas around the Murovdag range in the liberated Kalbajar region.

The extent of mines and UXOs in areas behind the former contact line remains largely unknown, as many

maps were either inaccurately drawn or nonexistent due to the chaotic nature of battles fought at the battalion level during the Karabakh War I. Furthermore, following the local battles over the span of approximately 26 years between the two wars, extensive mining of territories was undertaken in response to shifts in positions, as both sides sought to prevent reconnaissance efforts





by mining areas deemed suspicious, complicating the already dire situation. Recent monitoring of the AzCBL has identified landmine incidents in various villages of Shusha, Lachin, Jabrayil, Zangilan, Gubadli, Khojali, Aghdam, Terter, Fuzuli, Khojavand, Aghdara, Kalbajar regions indicating that the threat persists even outside the former contact line. From the Trilateral Statement signed by the heads of state of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia on 10 November 2020, until 1 October 2024, out of 226 incidents, 150 incidents (66%) occurred in the areas behind the former contact line, as a result of which 47 people were killed and 214 people were injured.

In addition to conventional landmines, booby traps pose a significant and insidious threat in liberated territories. These hidden explosives have resulted in numerous civilian casualties. For instance, two construction workers tragically lost their lives in a booby trap explosion in the Dashalti village of Shusha region, highlighting the unexpected dangers present in these areas.

Booby traps include various devices, such as hand grenades rigged to tripwires and improvised explosive devices that can be activated by unsuspecting individuals. In the Aghdam, Fuzuli, and Khojavand regions, anti-personnel mines were found strategically positioned on top of one or more anti-tank mines, a tactic intended to

amplify the explosive power in surprise formations, resulting in catastrophic detonations in civilian territories. Their use illustrates a disturbing aspect of warfare that targets civilians indiscriminately, perpetuating a cycle of fear and violence long after hostilities have ceased.

Landmines and UXO have transformed the landscapes of formerly contested regions into hazardous zones. All liberated regions remain heavily contaminated, and the consistent risk posed by these explosives deters the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs). Humanitarian organizations have reported that many families are unable to return home due to fears of landmine-related incidents. The psychological impact on communities cannot be understated. The fear of landmines disrupts daily life and hinders social cohesion, leading to prolonged trauma. Many individuals are reluctant to engage in activities that require moving through open land, which is critical for agricultural communities.

THE RIGHT OF IDPS TO RETURN, AND THE OBSTACLES THAT LANDMINES CREATE TO ENFORCE THIS RIGHT

The right of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to their homes is recognized within the Guiding



Principles on Internal Displacement, emphasizing the importance of ensuring their safety and dignity upon return. This right is further supported by international frameworks, including the UN Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons (Pinheiro Principles), which outline the necessity of creating conditions conducive to safe returns.

Following the military aggression of Armenian forces from 1988 to 1993, Azerbaijan witnessed the forced displacement of approximately 788,950 individuals from settlements in Nagorno-Karabakh and 7 adjacent regions. Today, a significant 90 percent of IDP families express a desire to return to their original homes. However, the pervasive threat of landmines and unexploded ordnance in these areas poses a critical barrier to the realization of this right, undermining efforts to facilitate safe and dignified returns.

Addressing the mine contamination issue is essential not only for safeguarding returning populations but also for rebuilding trust and stability in the affected regions. The government of Azerbaijan therefore, prioritizes demining operations to ensure that the aspirations of IDPs is realized without the risk of injury or death from explosive remnants of war.

IMPACT OF LANDMINES ON THE ECOLOGY, ENVIRONMENT, FLORA AND FAUNA

Landmines cost lives and severely damage ecosystems and hinder the development and use of renewable energy resources. More than one million landmines buried in the soil destroyed the flora and fauna that once developed harmoniously in the liberated territories of Azerbaijan. As a result of the explosion of thousands of landmines, considerable damage was done to the lands of Karabakh. Mine explosions caused plastic waste, damaged the environment and negatively affected the structure of agriculturally fertile lands. Mine-contaminated areas pose threats not only to people's right to live in clean environmental conditions, but also to the right to dignified life in general. Mines and UXOs are also significant pollution hazards to the environment. Chemicals from mines and UXOs can leach into soil and groundwater, contaminating local drinking water.

In the process of demining, mechanical demining has the most serious impact on the environment. During the mechanical demining process, cases of spillage of lubricants and fuel on the ground are recorded.



Mines and UXOs have a seriously negative effect on forest fires. Due to their presence, it is impossible to enter those areas to extinguish the fire. 5,400 ha of forest were destroyed in the occupied territories, and mines must be cleared first to restore the forest. "The leakage of the TNT breakdown products could happen, and this will contaminate the soil and underground waters. So besides that, the emission of carbon dioxide, after every explosion of landmines is also huge. So, one tank landmine, after its explosion, will emit 29 kg of carbon dioxide." "Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur were destroyed by Armenian military units and contaminated with approximately 1.5 million mines and explosive ordnances. This means at least 480 tons of plastic mass contami-

nated with harmful substances, 12,600 tons of carbon dioxide emissions and other toxic gases released into the environment." "Landmines are really a crime against humanity. If you have a plastic bag in the ocean, it takes 200 years to disappear. Mines never do, and mines keep continuing to pollute the environment." By ensuring that demining is integrated into national and international environmental strategies, and by including demining in discussions and strategies on climate change mitigation, adaptation and resilience, Final Declaration of the 3rd International Landmine Conference calls United Nations climate conferences to acknowledge and address the environmental impact of mines and explosive remnants of war and allocate resources to that area.



During the AzCBL's research, the facts of domestic and wild animals falling into landmines in the liberated territories were also obtained. The media disseminated information about the death of one of the two bears (*Ursus arctos*) and the maiming of the other one. A few years ago, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) published a picture of two leopards (*Panthera pardus*) with crippled legs on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. On 11 September 2023, the illegal armed groups of Armenia in the territory of Azerbaijan attached a remote-controlled improvised explosive device to the dog and forced it to move in the direction of the positions of the Azerbaijani Army. Several local NGOs appealed to 15 international organizations specialized in

protecting the rights of animals in the world, in connection with these facts.

GOVERNMENT POLICY

The Republic of Azerbaijan has not acceded to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (also known as Ottawa Convention). Azerbaijan has stated that it supports the treaty goals, but cannot accede as "there are serious threats against the Republic of Azerbaijan, and none of the neighboring states have joined this Convention". Nonetheless, Azerbaijan is committed to fulfilling the Convention's requirements voluntarily, affirming its non-production,



non-use, and non-export of anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions.

According to the Decree signed by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on 18 July 1998 establishing Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA), a non-military agency mandated to conduct humanitarian demining in areas posing the greatest threats to human safety and livelihoods. The Agency started its activities within the framework of the Joint Program on Combating Mine Threats in Azerbaijan, signed between the Government of Azerbaijan and UNDP on 2 April 1999. According to the Decree signed by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on 2 February 2021, the Charter of the Mine Action Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan that was reorganized on the basis of its predecessor, was approved. "ANAMA is a public legal entity that carries out demining of liberated territories, other territories affected by the war and military operations from mines, unexploded ordnances, devices containing explosives and other explosive remnants, as well as operates in the field of their temporary storage, transportation, neutralization, and implements the organization of other work necessary in this field, planning, coordination and management of activities"; furthermore "super-

vises the safe implementation of activities in accordance with international humanitarian demining standards."

The government of Azerbaijan has prioritized the clearance of mines and UXOs in liberated territories, a commitment evident in the "Great Return" state program. Since the end of the Karabakh War II, Azerbaijan has allocated 100 million Azerbaijani manats annually from its state budget for demining efforts and capacity building, with 95% of these operations funded through government resources.

In May 2024, Azerbaijan hosted the Third International Humanitarian Demining Conference on the theme of "Mitigating Environmental Impact of Landmines: Resource Mobilization for Safe and Green Future", which underscored its ongoing commitment to addressing landmine issues. The conference facilitated a partnership between ANAMA and the UNDP to establish an International Centre of Excellence and Training for Mine Action, aimed at enhancing local capacity and sharing best practices in humanitarian demining.

Azerbaijan's dedication to demining is further reflected in its efforts to declare mine clearance as the 18th



Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), particularly as it pertains to ensuring safe returns for displaced populations and fostering reconstruction, rehabilitation, prosperity and peace in the liberated territories. According to ANAMA, from 10 November 2020 to 1 October 2024, 33 776 antipersonnel mines, 20 654 anti-tank mines and 104 940 UXOs were neutralized as a result of humanitarian demining operations conducted in the recently liberated territories by the ANAMA, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Emergency Situations, State Border Service, 4 national commercial companies, and one national NGO International Eurasian Press Fund (IEPF). As a result, 165 872.3 hectares were cleared.

FEMALE DEMINING TEAMS

In a notable advancement towards gender inclusivity, Azerbaijan has established female demining teams. After announcing the initiative, 54 applicants, including those with paramedic skills, expressed interest in joining the project. Trainings commenced on 16 June 2023, led by international partner – Mines Advisory Group (MAG) from the UK. Ultimately, 25 women (23 deminers and 2 paramedics) became operational, forming part of four teams.

These teams have made substantial contributions to demining efforts, currently working in Aghdam region and battlefield in the village of Gulluja. Since their operations began on 25 September 2023, they have cleared over 3.2 million square meters of land, discovering numerous anti-personnel, anti-tank mines and UXOs. Their work not only enhances safety but also challenges traditional gender roles in a field historically dominated by men.

Moreover, when weather conditions restrict demining activities, these female teams actively participate in explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) programs. They educate local populations about the dangers of landmines, empowering communities to navigate the risks associated with returning to their homes.

LANDMINE AND UXO VICTIMS

The humanitarian toll of landmines is staggering. Data from the AzCBL indicates that Azerbaijan has a higher number of landmine victims compared to other regions in the South Caucasus. The statistics are troubling: from 1991 to 1 November 2024, more 3400 individuals have been recorded as victims of landmines and UXOs, including 38 women and 359 teenagers. From



10 November 2020 to 1 November 2024, 70 people (55 civilians) were killed and 311 people (143 civilians) were injured in 228 incidents as a result of landmine and UXO explosions.

Landmine victims often suffer from severe and life-altering injuries, including amputations, hearing and vision loss, head and neck injuries, abdominal and chest injuries, shrapnel injuries, burns, paraplegia (loss of movement) and psychological trauma. Many of these

individuals find themselves unable to work or provide for their families, leading to economic hardship and social isolation.

Civilian landmine victims often report limited access to financial aid and ongoing treatment, highlighting the need for more equitable support systems. Moreover, many victims experience ongoing medical and rehabilitation needs, requiring vocational training to reintegrate into society. Awareness campaigns are essential



to educate victims about their rights and available resources provided by the laws of Azerbaijan, ensuring they receive the support they deserve.

EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE RISK EDUCATION (EORE)

Given the persistent threat of landmines, comprehensive explosive ordnance risk education initiatives are critical. ANAMA has installed 1,311 warning billboards in liberated territories and distributed more than 200,000

informational materials. Besides, 46,900 books called “Mine Threat” were printed and delivered to Regional Education Departments and schools through the Ministry of Education.

EORE programs aim to inform communities about the dangers posed by landmines, particularly for vulnerable groups like IDPs and children. Training programs involved 16,639 employees of 296 institutions as a part of Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) programs. The activities have been coordinated by the ANAMA and



covered different directions, geographical locations and groups of people (displaced persons, children, those involved in social-infrastructure projects, tourists, etc.). These educational efforts are vital for reducing casualties and empowering communities to navigate the challenges posed by landmines.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT TO MINE ACTION

International support is indispensable in addressing the landmine crisis in Azerbaijan. To date, approximately \$349.1 million has been allocated for demining operations in Karabakh, of which \$16.1 million were received from international sources. In 2023, Azerbaijan allocated over \$64 million from its state budget for mine action; however, this amount falls short in relation to the scale of the problem, highlighting the critical importance of international support.

While significant progress has been made, experts estimate that Azerbaijan will require approximately 30 years and \$25 billion to comprehensively address its mine contamination issues. Continued collaboration with international organizations, NGOs, and governments is essential to secure the necessary funding and expertise for effective mine action.

CONCLUSION

The landmine and UXO crisis in Azerbaijan remains a significant challenge, particularly in the liberated territories. This challenge is a multifaceted issue that encompasses humanitarian, ecological, and socio-economic dimensions. The government has prioritized demining efforts as part of its broader "Great Return" program, demonstrating a commitment to ensuring the safety and resettlement of internally displaced persons. Despite substantial domestic investment and initiatives aimed at capacity building and international collaboration, the scale of the contamination



necessitates ongoing support from the international community. Azerbaijan's strategic focus on humanitarian demining underscores its commitment to enhancing safety, rebuilding communities, and promoting sustainable development in the aftermath of the war.

While some progress has been made in demining and addressing the associated dangers, the journey toward a safer, mine-free future remains challenging. Ongoing efforts are essential to ensure the safety of communities, restore ecosystems, and uphold the rights of displaced persons. Ultimately, a collective effort is essential to achieve lasting peace and stability, ensuring that all individuals can return to their homes in safety and dignity.

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