

## **Development Story**

### **Azerbaijan: A National Capacity for Mine Action**

Landmines are easy to lay, but far harder to clear. Once in the ground, they threaten human lives and livelihoods when people cannot use contaminated land.

The Republic of Azerbaijan is one of dozens of countries struggling to clean up landmines in the wake of conflict. While one model for mine action is to have the international community manage it, UNDP has stood by Azerbaijan's efforts to build its own national institution, recognizing that mine action may continue for decades.

As a result, the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action, known as ANAMA, has grown from a fledgling organization to one fully equipped to clear mines, provide risk education and assist survivors of accidents. Since 1999, ANAMA has cleared and certified as safe nearly 186 square kilometres of land, in the process destroying over 665,000 mines and other explosive weapons. More than 160,000 people displaced by conflict have been resettled as a result.

Fakhraddin Maharramov, a resident of Zobcug village, lived in a camp for displaced people until clearance meant he could safely return to his land. He says, "We are happy to be back and work on our fields without fear."

### **The growth of an agency**

Azerbaijan's mine problem goes back nearly a quarter of a century to the 1988 clash with Armenia over the autonomous region of Nagorno Karabakh. Land changed hands multiple times and mines were randomly laid, often by scattered groups of partisan forces. By the end, there was little record of where threats remained.

A cease-fire was brokered in 1994. As the Government began preparing to resettle a million people displaced by the conflict, indications of a massive landmine problem emerged. In 1998, the President of Azerbaijan decreed the formation of ANAMA as a non-military agency mandated to conduct humanitarian demining, meaning it would focus first on areas posing the greatest threats to human safety and livelihoods. The Government called on UNDP for assistance in establishing it.

UNDP brought in international experts to train ANAMA staff on all aspects of mine action—such as carrying out surveys to identify mine locations, removing explosives and supporting survivors of accidents. Initially, it also helped mobilize resources and broker international partnerships to support the agency; by 2003, it was ready to assume this role itself. By 2004, it was operating primarily using the expertise of its own staff.

Today, Elnur Gasimov leads ANAMA's Training, Survey and Quality Assurance Team. In 1993, when he was 15 years old, he spotted a shiny metal object along a road. Curious, he picked it up. In a flash, the discarded fuse of a hand grenade exploded in his hand, destroying three fingers.

After recovering, he went on to complete his education, deciding along the way to dedicate his career to mine action. At ANAMA, he learned to provide mine risk education to schoolchildren—sharing vital safety information that had not been available to him as a young man. “I want to prevent accidents such as the one that happened to me,” he says. As he has risen to become the head of training, he has become a symbol of hope and compassion, teaching by example that recovery from tragedy is well within reach.

### **Surveying the problem**

One early activity at ANAMA was to comprehensively survey the extent of the mine problem. While a local non-governmental organization in 2001-2002 had conducted a general survey confirming mine hazards on 60 square kilometres of land, Azerbaijan needed a landmine impact survey. This would more precisely map where the mines were, along with their socio-economic impacts, and suggest actions for mitigation.

Carried out in 2002-2003, the second survey found 736 square kilometres of land contaminated by mines. This provided an initial basis for ANAMA to develop its programme, but it was also clear that surveying required the ongoing collecting, updating and cross-checking of data. A third survey in 2006 reduced the estimate of suspected hazardous areas by 60 percent, to 306 square kilometres. With its growing experience, and by continuing to draw at times on UNDP training and expertise, ANAMA was able to conclude that full-scale mine clearance would need to take place on only 10 percent of this area.

To further develop the accuracy of its survey capabilities, ANAMA set up survey teams including people from affected localities. These still today go from village to village to meet with community members and collect updated information. This is fed into a national mine action database that helps steer clearance efforts towards areas most in need.

ANAMA is now releasing land identified as contaminated by mines or unexploded ordnance at a rate of around 30 square kilometres a year—meaning either the land is cleared or confirmed as safe. Only 10 years ago, the release rate was less than a square kilometre per year. To expedite its efforts, the agency has moved away from manual demining, where individuals sweep the ground with metal detectors. It now uses an approach that combines mine clearing machines, mine-detection dogs and visual observation.

Still, the process is painstaking and slow. While ANAMA aims for a mine-free Azerbaijan by 2013, this does not include disputed territories still under Armenian control. By ANAMA estimates, clearance there may take up to another 40 years.

### **Making connections to development**

UNDP’s support to ANAMA has consistently emphasized the socio-economic impacts of demining—an approach that the Government has taken seriously by integrating ANAMA’s activities in the State Socio-Economic Development Plan, one of Azerbaijan’s primary development planning documents. Mine risk education programmes reach over 50,000 children in schools. The ministries of health and labour

assist survivors of mine accidents with medical care and physical rehabilitation programmes. ANAMA manages a micro-credit initiative to improve the livelihoods of victims and their families, and oversees efforts such as carpet-weaving workshops that develop new skills.

Clearance priorities are directly linked to people's ability to reuse land or find employment. In the Alkhanli region, for instance, decontaminating the banks of a local river has allowed farmers to once more draw its water for their crops. Irrigation has been extended to 250 hectares of cultivated lands that produce 500 tons of grain each year.

An important achievement for the entire nation was clearance that permitted continued construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Two months of effort were required along a stretch that was 22 kilometres long and 60 metres wide—121 pieces of unexploded ordnance were found and destroyed. The pipeline is considered key to jumpstarting renewed economic growth for all of Azerbaijan.

### **Sharing new knowledge**

Today, Azerbaijan interacts with a variety of international institutions involved in mine action, facilitating a two-way exchange of knowledge on successful practices. UNDP has helped it make connections to organizations including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Bank. Collaboration with the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining has focused on developing a new generation of information management systems for mine action and testing new mine action technology.

ANAMA has also begun supporting other countries with their national mine action programmes. It has provided training to the Georgia National Army unit charged with mine action, and to a Turkish consortium clearing a border crossing with Syria. A partnership with the national mine action agency in Afghanistan is helping it prepare to take over tasks still done by international partners. Given that dozens of countries still need to rid themselves of mines, Azerbaijan's success within its own borders should be widely shared.