

MINE
ACTION
REVIEW

CLEARING THE MINES 2021

A REPORT BY MINE ACTION REVIEW FOR THE NINETEENTH MEETING
OF STATES PARTIES TO THE ANTI-PERSONNEL MINE BAN CONVENTION

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MINE ACTION REVIEW ADVISORY BOARD:



Norwegian People's Aid



KEY DEVELOPMENTS

The six-week armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region that broke out in September 2020 ended with Azerbaijan regaining control over seven districts of its internationally recognised territory, in addition to part of Nagorno-Karabakh. The area along the former Line of Contact (LOC) between Armenia and Azerbaijan is heavily mined, leading to a huge area of anti-personnel mine contamination falling under Azerbaijan's jurisdiction and control. A huge clearance effort is underway involving the Army, the Ministry of Interior (Mol), and the Mine Action Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (ANAMA, formerly the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- Azerbaijan should accede to the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC) as a matter of priority.
- Azerbaijan should clear anti-personnel mines in areas under its jurisdiction or control as soon as possible, consonant with its obligations under international human rights law.
- Azerbaijan should mobilise funds to enable survey and clearance of all mined areas as quickly as possible.
- ANAMA should work to establish a robust nationwide baseline of mined area using evidence-based non-technical and technical survey.
- Azerbaijan should reinforce the necessary national structures to oversee efficient and safe mine action in the mined areas recently returned to its control. This process should be underpinned by the adoption or revision of national mine action legislation that reflects the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS).
- ANAMA should ensure that mined areas are released in accordance with international best practice, by ensuring that clearance is only conducted in areas where there is clear evidence of contamination.
- ANAMA should ensure that National Mine Action Standards (NMAS) are updated in line with IMAS.
- ANAMA should draft a new mine action strategy, to replace the one expired in 2018, reflecting the significant increase in explosive ordnance (EO) contamination now under Azerbaijan's control.
- ANAMA should complete the transition to Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) Core as soon as possible.
- Azerbaijan should systematically collect and report publicly on data on contaminated areas as well as progress in survey and clearance.
- ANAMA should elaborate a gender and diversity policy for mine action and an associated implementation plan.

UNDERSTANDING OF AP MINE CONTAMINATION

The precise extent of contamination from anti-personnel mines in Azerbaijan is currently unknown but is certainly massive, especially along the 300km-long LOC that previously existed between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces. The defensive belts of berms, anti-tank ditches, and barbed wire, along the LOC, which are estimated to vary between 3km and 7km in depth, contain massive quantities of both anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines, and is now recognised as one of the largest mined areas in the world.¹ The LOC has been heavily mined over the three decades since 1990 by all parties to the conflict.² Further minefields and other EO contamination, including abandoned explosive ordnance (AXO), are found in areas previously occupied by Armenia outside the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

In 2018, ANAMA had estimated that mine contamination in areas occupied by Armenia covered between 350km² and 830km², and contained between 50,000 and 100,000 mines.³

The figure, however, is now believed to be a significant underestimate. According to a mine map of Aghdam provided by Armenia in June 2021, Aghdam district alone contains 97,000 anti-personnel and anti-vehicles mines.⁴ That is only one of the total seven districts reclaimed by Azerbaijan in 2020.

In July 2020, fighting broke out on the international borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in September 2020, Azerbaijan launched a fully-fledged military operation. Fierce fighting for six weeks was brought to an end on 8 November 2020 by a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement. Under the terms of the "trilateral statement", Azerbaijan took full control of the five major cities of Fuzuli, Gubadi, Jabrail, Shusha, and Zangilan. Armenian troops also left the districts of Agdam, Kalbajar, and Lachin, handing them back to Azerbaijani control by 1 December 2020.⁵ Azerbaijan also gained control of a substantial part of Nagorno-Karabakh

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities should make a commitment to respect the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC).
- The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities should commit to never use anti-personnel mines.
- Nagorno-Karabakh should clear or ensure the clearance of anti-personnel mines in areas under its jurisdiction or control as soon as possible, consonant with its obligations under international human rights law.
- Nagorno-Karabakh should expedite the creation of a mine action authority to enhance coordination between stakeholders and develop a comprehensive mine action database.

UNDERSTANDING OF AP MINE CONTAMINATION

Estimates of Nagorno-Karabakh's mine contamination have risen sharply as a result of survey conducted by HALO Trust. In 2019, the estimate more than doubled to 7.75km², and in 2020 it rose a further 22% to 9.48km² after The HALO Trust identified 58 additional mined areas: 39 confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs) and 17 suspected hazardous areas (SHAs) (see Table 1).¹

Table 1: Anti-personnel mined area by region (at end 2020)²

Region	CHAs	Area (m ²)	SHAs	Area (m ²)	Total area (m ²)
Askeran	13	435,410	1	28,309	463,719
Hadrut	19	2,068,787	0	0	2,068,787
Lachin	17	550,631	0	0	550,631
Martakert	109	2,626,743	124	3,450,231	6,076,974
Martuni	2	154,715	0	0	154,715
Shahumyan	4	167,900	0	0	167,900
Totals	164	6,004,186	125	3,478,540	9,482,726

Most of the additional hazardous areas were located in the north-eastern Martakert area bordering Azerbaijan, with smaller additions in Hadrut and Askeran, all pre-dating the six-week conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that broke out in September 2020. Azerbaijan reported that pro-Karabakh forces laid landmines in that conflict as they retreated before its advancing forces but it is unclear whether any contamination was added in the remaining territory under the control of the Nagorno-Karabakh authorities.³ A large amount of this contamination is in areas now under Azerbaijani control as the areas remaining after the conflict are considerably smaller than the traditional Oblast. The border has yet to be demarcated preventing a precise determination of how much contamination is in Azerbaijan but HALO Trust reported that more than 40 CHAs and SHAs in its database are in, or contiguous to, areas under Azerbaijan's control.⁴

All regions of Nagorno-Karabakh have been affected by mines and unexploded submunitions as a result of the 1988–94 conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and subsequent combat. Mines were laid by both the Azeri and pro-Karabakh forces during the war in the 1990s, with a relatively high proportion of anti-vehicle mines being used in some regions.⁵ The mines were of Soviet design and manufacture, and due to the nature of the conflict certain areas were mined several times.⁶ Nagorno-Karabakh's armed forces said they laid additional anti-personnel mines along the Armenian-Azerbaijani Line of Contact (LoC) in 2013, both east and north of disputed territory.⁷ Unconfirmed reports suggest more mines were laid after the so-called "four-day war" in April 2016.