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Mine-action Challenges and Responses in Georgia

Following an international conflict in 2008, Georgia faces a greater threat from landmines and explosive remnants of war than that posed by previous violence. In response to this threat, Georgia, with assistance provided by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) and the Government of Canada, created national bodies to coordinate and implement landmine and ERW clearance. This article documents Georgia's past ERW, landmine and cluster-munitions contamination, as well as efforts to remove these threats.

by Emil M. Hasanov [iMMAP/ERWCC] and Petri Nevalainen [iMMAP]

Georgia is party to the *Convention on the Prohibition on the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and their Destruction* (also known as the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMBC), and acceded to Protocol V on ERW on 22 December 2008 and to Amended Protocol II on Landmines on 8 June 2009.

According to Article 6 of the Georgia Law on International Treaties, international treaties are an integral part of Georgian legislation, and the provisions of these treaties establish specific rights and obligations that are enacted directly without requiring adoption of additional laws or regulations.¹

Landmines and ERW in Georgia

The landmine problem in Georgia is primarily a result of landmine use around former Soviet/Russian military bases along international borders and from conflicts with the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.² Georgia had neither the authority nor the responsibility to clear these bases while they remained under Russian control. However, Russia transferred the last of the military bases located in Georgia to

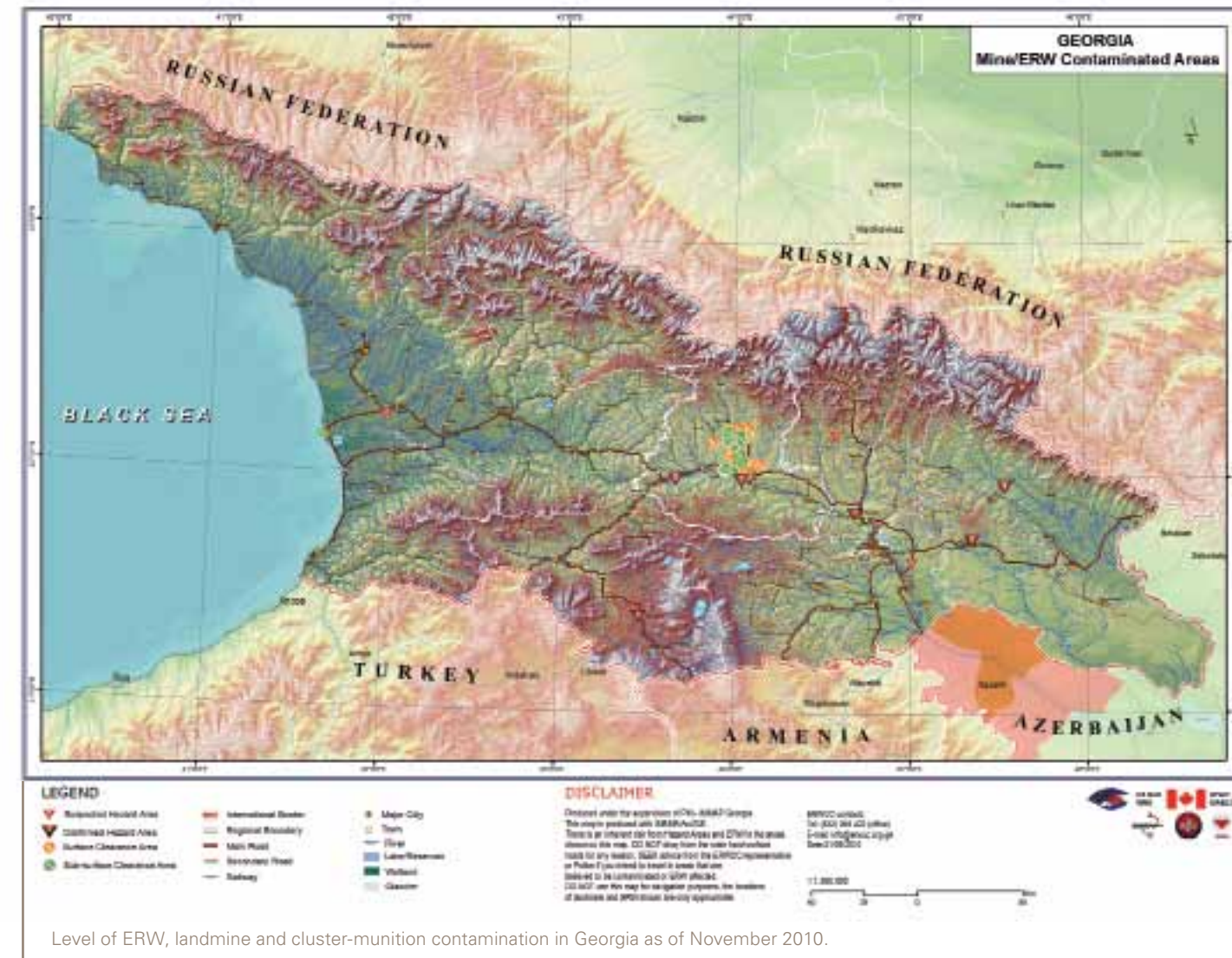


Russian checkpoint.
All graphics courtesy of ERWCC Georgia.

Georgian authority in November 2007, allowing authorities to begin clearance operations.³

In addition to landmines, Georgia is faced with unexploded cluster submunitions as a result of the conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. This conflict created a serious threat of ERW and cluster-munition injuries to the Georgian population at large. The impact

of this contamination was most noticeable from the Shida Kartli region north of Gori to Tskhinvali in South Ossetia. Additionally, aerial-delivered bombs and missiles that targeted areas in Poti harbor, Kopitnari, Batumi (Black Sea coast) and around Tbilisi contributed to an increased ERW threat and impact. The increased ERW contamination added to prior problems that Georgia faced from



Level of ERW, landmine and cluster-munition contamination in Georgia as of November 2010.

legacy Soviet/Russian minefields, as well as the existing ERW threat in the Abkhazia region.⁴

Georgia has not acceded to the *Convention on Cluster Munitions*. Georgian officials stated in a letter to the *Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitor* in April 2010, "The Georgian government has expressed its support to the spirit of the Mine Ban Treaty and the Cluster Munitions Convention, but the bitter reality on the ground with reference to the security situation in the region didn't allow us to adjoin the mentioned conventions. Unfortunately the situation has not changed much and has even worsened security-wise that does not leave us any option other than to stay reluctant to join the conventions until the credible changes occur in the security environment of the region."⁵

Russia used cluster munitions near towns and villages in the Gori-Tskhinvali corridor near the South Ossetia administrative border of Georgia during the August 2008 conflict. According to a Human Rights Watch report, Russian clus-

ter-munition strikes on populated areas killed 12 civilians and injured 46 during this period.⁶ As a result, unexploded submunitions affected populated and agricultural areas, posing a threat to the civilian population. Russia produced and stockpiled the cluster-munition types used in the August 2008 conflict (AO-2.5 RTM and 9N210 submunitions, RBK series bombs, Uragan rockets and Iskander missiles). Georgia reports possessing RBK-500 bombs, but they are no longer active and are slated for destruction.⁷

Georgia also used cluster munitions, including M85 submunitions in Mk 4 160mm rockets (Georgia procured these weapons as packages from Israel) during the August 2008 conflict.⁵ Regarding the Human Rights Watch report, the Ministry of Defence stated Georgia launched 24 volleys of GRADLAR Mk 4 rockets, each volley containing 13 of the weapons. While these rockets can have unitary warheads as well, assuming all 13 contained cluster munitions would result in a total of 32,448 M85 submunitions.⁷

Currently the threat of ERW, cluster munitions and landmines around former military facilities and in some border areas outside the South Ossetia borders continues to endanger the civilian population. Furthermore, potentially productive land is unusable due to the contamination, preventing the government from undertaking numerous socioeconomic development projects. These projects include agricultural development in the Shida Kartli region and tourism expansion on the Black Sea and at important religious sites, such as Mskheta.⁸ On the other hand, The HALO Trust completed clearance of Abkhazia and a ceremony was held on 4 November 2011 to acknowledge completion of this project.

“...that does not leave us any option other than to stay reluctant to join the conventions until the credible changes occur in the security environment of the region.”

Norwegian People's Aid conducted a General Mine Action Assessment funded by the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance. Between October 2009 and January 2010 the governments of Hungary and the Czech Republic funded this assessment through ITF. The GMAA identified eight suspected hazardous areas and seven confirmed hazardous areas in 13 districts, the latter of which totaled more than an estimated 4.5 square kilometers (1.73 square miles).

Mine-action Coordination in Georgia

Immediately following the August 2008 conflict many international humanitarian-aid agencies rallied to provide emergency response support. Several international organizations, including the European Union Monitoring Mission, the International Committee of the Red Cross, ITF and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines - Georgia, engaged in humanitarian mine-action activities in Georgia, but these activities lacked coordination. The Georgian Government had discussed for several years how to best address the legacy landmine issue, but had not until the recent conflict, realized the importance of coordinating HMA activities. Two primary demining operators were identified: HALO and NPA. HALO already operated in Abkhazia, the breakaway autonomous region of Georgia, and established the Abkhaz Mine Action Office there in 1999; NPA deployed demining teams in Georgia through the end of June 2010.

At the national level, demining capacity was represented by Georgia's Ministry of Defence Brigade of Engineers and by

the Ministry of Internal Affairs Explosive Ordnance Response Teams. On 9 October 2008 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Georgian Ministry of Defence and the international nongovernmental organization, the Information Management & Mine Action Programs.⁹ PM/WRA tasked iMMAP to support the Georgian Government in establishing the Explosive Remnants of War Coordination Center to address the ERW problem resulting from the conflict and to assist in coordinating clearance of the legacy minefields. Although ERWCC began operations in October 2008, the official opening was held on 25 February 2009 in Tbilisi.¹⁰ According to Deputy Defence Minister Giorgi Muchaidze

who spoke at the launch, “It is more important to reorganize the above mentioned office as a national mine action center, which would be a step forward for struggling with this problem.”¹¹ iMMAP and other stakeholders determined through an assessment that there was an urgent need to develop local capacity for HMA activities, as well as for Georgia to establish national HMA standards and technical safety guidelines derived from the International Mine Action Standards.

On 23 October 2008, the Georgian Ministry of Defence and the Slovenia-based ITF signed a two-year Memorandum of Understanding on HMA assistance. ITF initiated a national capacity building program in January 2009 that followed ERWCC's general goals. Among other things, the program focused on providing assistance to national authorities in HMA capacity building.¹²

ERWCC Operations

iMMAP engaged the Ministries of Defence and Internal Affairs through Memorandum of Understandings and worked closely with other Georgian authorities. ERWCC became the Georgian entity tasked to coordinate and execute ERW mitigation and is responsible for external quality assurance/quality control of HMA activities (Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade initially funded QA/QC activities). Through iMMAP's guidance, the ERWCC continued to coordinate HMA activities in Georgia, as well as conduct QA/QC and act as the national HMA authority. These activities and responsibilities were transferred to the Georgian Government in early 2011. During the lifespan of



An ERWCC hazard assessment in Perevi, Georgia.

the ERWCC, the tasks and responsibilities that were identified included the following:¹³

- QA/QC of demining/clearance activities
- QA/QC of unexploded ordnance and explosive hazard clearance and disposal
- Battle-area clearance
- Mine-risk education
- ERW information management from any conflict or source
- Community liaison
- Stockpile reduction
- Advocacy

The ERWCC hosted regularly scheduled coordination meetings with all major HMA stakeholders in Georgia. These stakeholders included international NGOs, the Georgian Red Cross, the Georgian Ministries of Defence and Interior, and the Georgian Army Brigade of Engineers. These meetings were held biweekly or as requested by the parties involved for the purpose of synchronizing and monitoring HMA activities. ERWCC also established mechanisms to assist other NGOs and international institutions (United Nations agen-

cies, EU Monitoring Mission, etc.). When suspected contamination is reported and rapid assessments are required, clearance plans are made jointly with the appropriate stakeholders. ERWCC conducted several risk-assessment missions during 2010 to survey potential new hazardous areas. An example is Perevi village, where the Ministries of Defence and Interior requested that the ERWCC conduct an ERW hazard assessment after Russian troops withdrew from the village at the western border with South Ossetia on 18 October 2010. Russian forces in the Perevi area controlled the main road in Perevi village, which links nearby South Ossetia villages to the rest of the breakaway region. ERWCC found evidence of the use of cluster-munitions and other ERW and provided this information for further action, such as mine risk education, victim assistance and clearance.

Transition and Georgian Ownership

On 30 December 2010 the Georgian Ministry of Defence issued a decree instructing that HMA be included as part of a Ministry body known as the State Military Scientific Technical Center, or DELTA.¹⁴ DELTA has now assumed the



An IMAS training course at ERWCC.

HMA coordination role, though existing ERWCC structure and operations are threatened due to lack of funding. ERWCC has largely halted operations, with the exception of an emergency follow-up clearance operation in Mskheta. The organization hopes to resume clearance activities with technical assistance from the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action and funding from the Georgian Ministry of Defence and NATO.

IMAS and QA/QC training courses were conducted for ERWCC staff (mainly the QA/QC section), the Joint Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces and DELTA, with funding and assistance from PM/WRA. The aim of this effort was to increase the level of knowledge regarding HMA and to prepare for handover to Georgian ownership. The final handover of ERWCC to DELTA occurred in the beginning of 2011. ♦

Note: This article covers operational activities in Georgia until March 2011.

See endnotes page 82



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