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Knights in Armored Vehicles

The HALO Trust in the Caucasus



One of the HALO teams.
Photo c/o HALO Trust

by Richard Boulter

The demise of the Soviet Union and the resultant rush to establish claims over disputed areas and to assert ethnic identity led to a widespread call to arms. Nowhere was this more the case than in the Caucasus. The former southern Caucasian "soviets" of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia have all asserted their independence from Russia and all have witnessed bloodshed resulting from inter-ethnic fighting. In the north Caucasus there has been fighting in Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia and most notably in Chechnya. The virtual abandonment of former weapons stockpiles accompanied by some very definite mischief by the departing Russian troops has led to munitions, including mines falling into the hands of almost every potential warring faction. To no one's surprise the region has been troubled ever since Soviet domination ceased.

The roots of the problems in the Caucasus predate the beginning of this century, but Stalin in his role as "People's Commissar for the Affairs of Nationalities" made some decisions which he would have known would fuel long term strife. His policy of divide and rule worked for his tenure in office, but even before the collapse of communism there were signs of impending trouble; by 1989 the dispute over Nagorno Karabakh had re-emerged and Abkhazia had asked to leave Georgia. Although fighting has

recommenced in Chechnya, most of the inter-ethnic fighting took place in the period 1990-95 and the borders of the Caucasus are by and large the same as those of five years ago.

Ten years after the Soviet Union was disbanded, some semblance of order is now emerging in the region and the process of mine clearance is well under way. The HALO Trust began its mine clearance work in January 1995 with a training program in Nagorno Karabakh. The program, which had an initial expatriate presence for 18 months, aimed to establish an indigenous mine action capacity that could carry on the work once international support was withdrawn. This was then followed by mine clearance programs in Abkhazia (Georgia) and in Chechnya. In each of these places in the Caucasus, HALO has been the sole mine clearance operator, which has led to HALO taking the lead in other areas such as mine awareness and in establishing mine information centers.

Each of the programs is now described in some detail to give the reader a broader perspective of the particular challenges and rewards that the Caucasus present.

Nagorno Karabakh

Despite long standing historical claims and being largely populated by Armenian speaking Christians, in 1923 Stalin decreed that Nagorno Karabakh



Cover of a mine awareness book distributed by HALO Trust.
Photo c/o HALO Trust

would become a part of Muslim Azerbaijan. The Armenians contested this resolution throughout the 65 years of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast's existence. In 1988 following the submission of an 80,000 name petition, the Oblast Soviet of the NKAO appealed to the Supreme Soviets of the USSR, Azerbaijan and Armenia to allow them to secede from Azerbaijan and be attached to Armenia. Baku rejected the appeal and shortly afterwards violence broke out, initially in the form of a riot on the streets of an Azeri town, but the deaths of two Azeris in the riot led to a pogrom. The situation deteriorated until July 12, 1988, when the NKAO Oblast



Demining a former children's playground.
Photo c/o HALO Trust

Soviet took the decision to leave Azerbaijan and join Armenia. Soviet troops were deployed to Karabakh to suppress nationalist sentiments, which they managed to do until 1991 when the Soviet Union broke up. Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh all declared their independence and held elections. At this point the Azeri Soviet began its attempt to re-establish control over Karabakh and between 1992 and May 1994 fierce fighting claimed around 40,000 lives. The fighting involved extensive use of armor, artillery and aircraft, as well as the laying of many barrier mine fields. Aerial sub-munitions were dropped across the entire region and are still uncovered on a regular basis.

In May 1994, a cease fire was brokered which was confirmed in writing by Armenia and Azerbaijan in July 1994, six months later The HALO Trust commenced its mine clearance program in Karabakh. HALO opted to work with the Karabakhi military Engineering Service as they were already engaged in mine clearance work. This department provided the best hope of the work continuing after HALO departed.

Working with the Karabkhis HALO set out to:

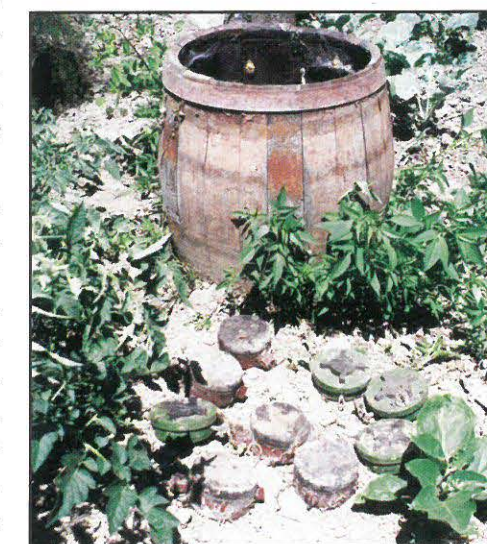
- Establish a complete mine-clearance organization that can be used as the basis for expansion by the authorities.
- Create competence in the technical disciplines of mine clearance, EOD, mine field database management, reconnaissance, survey and marking, public education and the running of a telephone emergency service.
- Train a local management structure.
- Create conditions and systems that are sustainable by the authorities.

HALO's expatriate team had the experience of other HALO mine clearance and survey work in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Mozambique and Bosnia. The team achieved its set aims within 12 months of commencing work, and for the last six months of the program the expatriates adopted a watching brief. The team left Karabakh on June 30, 1996.

In 1999, HALO personnel returned to Karabakh to assess the performance of the local capacity and to seek out weak areas where HALO might be of renewed assistance. The monitoring team was delighted to see that despite no outside support whatsoever, mine clearance was still tak-

ing place on a daily basis and that almost all of the structures originally established by HALO continued to operate in the manner originally intended. Of course, the team did find requirements for support, principally in the refurbishment and replacement of some very tired (through good use) demining equipment, but by and large the results of the monitoring mission were extremely pleasing.

HALO is now injecting some additional support to the Mine Action Center in Stepankert. The provision of new powerful computers and mapping software will greatly enhance the capacity of the center to disseminate clear information. Protective visors that have seen daily use for more than four years are in need of replacement, and broken electronic items such as radios and detectors are being returned to their manufacturers for repairs which were beyond the capacity of the Karabakhi personnel. The Nagorno Karabakh Mine



Nine AP mines in Abkhazia which had been stored in an open barrel in a tomato patch for six years.
Photo c/o HALO Trust

Action Center will continue to collate and disseminate information, to provide equipment and technical support and to direct and coordinate mine clearance and UXO work in much the same fashion as any other MAC aims to do, the difference in Karabakh is that it all happens at rates which the host government has been able to sustain.

Abkhazia

Abkhazia is a secessionist republic that lies along the eastern shore of the Black Sea. The Abkhaz fought an 18-month war with Georgia in 1992-23, that saw heavy fighting and the widespread use of mines. Since the conventional fighting ended, limited partisan activity has continued especially in the southernmost Abkhaz region of Gali. Mines can be found throughout southern and central Abkhazia but the major concentrations were laid in Sukhumi (the modern day Abkhaz capital) along the south bank of the Gumista River (the Georgian forces' northern front throughout most of the war).

Mines were also placed on the north bank of the Inguri River (the present *de-facto* frontier and Abkhaz forces southern front since the end of the fighting) and along the M27 corridor, the Main Supply Route for the Georgians during the war. The HALO Trust began its clearance program in Abkhazia in November 1997. This was achieved only after many months of negotiations with both parties to end the conflict and only after an agreement was made which pledged clearance activities would be split on an equal basis to support both Georgian and Abkhaz interests. The clearance was originally supported by the British and German governments and by Fondation Pro Victimis of Geneva, but since then the program has further been supported by the Dutch and Japanese governments. Additional support has been pledged by both the American and Canadian governments, which will enable HALO to expand its program to employ around 300 Abkhaz/Georgian personnel.

The program in Abkhazia addresses all aspects of the mine problem. HALO has established the Abkhaz Mines Action Center (AMAC), which produces high quality maps of the mined areas and conducts Mines Awareness training in the Russian, Georgian and Abkhaz languages. AMAC also coordinates clearance activities and acts as a conduit for all requests for clearance and survey work. Mine clearance is conducted by both manual and mechanical means. The mechanical clearance is being conducted using specially modified Medium-Wheeled Loaders which were a gift from the British Government's Ministry of Defense. HALO's specialist instructors have trained local EOD personnel in the use of relatively sophisticated tools such as rocket wrenches and de-armers which have allowed them to deal with all items of ordnance used in the Abkhaz conflict, the largest of which were 500kg air-dropped bombs. The team have now been asked by the Abkhaz authorities to deal with a stock of SA2 missiles and the disposal of these large items will commence shortly.

Clearance in Abkhazia has benefited enormously through the provision of maps made at the time of the conflict which have been given to HALO by the former combatants. Many of these maps are of exceptionally good quality and give a very clear indication of where to start looking and what to expect to find. The maps also give a very good indication as to the scale of the problem throughout the country. For example, the maps indicate that only around 5,500 mines were laid along the main Georgian front line, and overall indicate that the total figure for mines used lies somewhere in the range of 15-30,000. This is still a lot of mines but a long way short of the figure of 1 million that was proclaimed by several leading international agencies in the mid-1990s.

The mine clearance teams in Abkhazia have so far concentrated on the clearance of the mine concentrations in Sukhumi and Gali. HALO expects to finish the Sukhumi (Gumista River) clearance work this year, but the occasional use of anti-vehicle mines on routes away from the major highways has hindered clearance in Gali. HALO is planning to commence a new U.S. government-funded clearance program in the Ochamchire region of Abkhazia. HALO believes that all the mines in peaceful Abkhazia can be cleared within five years, but the full clearance of the Gali region will not take place until a lasting peace settlement has been agreed upon.

Chechnya

Recently in the forefront of the news, Chechnya had been home to a HALO Trust mine clearance program since 1996. By the time of the recent Russian invasion, HALO had established both manual and

mechanical mine-clearance teams, trained a UXO capacity and had conducted a full survey of the entire republic. HALO had based its operation in the southwest of Chechnya, scene to much of the fighting and relatively far more secure than Grozny. HALO was in the final steps of the hand-over of full management responsibility to Chechen personnel when the present fighting broke out.

The recent fighting has caused HALO to suspend its activities but should the Chechens achieve a settlement, there is every likelihood that HALO will return immediately to carry out the much needed emergency work. Indeed, HALO kept personnel in Chechnya for as long as was thought reasonably safe to do so, with the last clearance work of hazardous ordnance taking place as recently as December 1999.

For most of 1998 and the first half of 1999 HALO was the only international agency with a permanent presence in Chechnya and so became a much valued employer. The respect for the nature of the work undertaken afforded some measure of security for the expatriate personnel. HALO found far fewer mines in Chechnya than in other regions in the Caucasus; the typical Russian unit would post a couple of OZM 72 bounding fragmentation mines around a road checkpoint to deter would-be aggressors, but very few barrier mine fields were laid. As for the Chechens, they were too poorly equipped to lay major mine fields but they did make

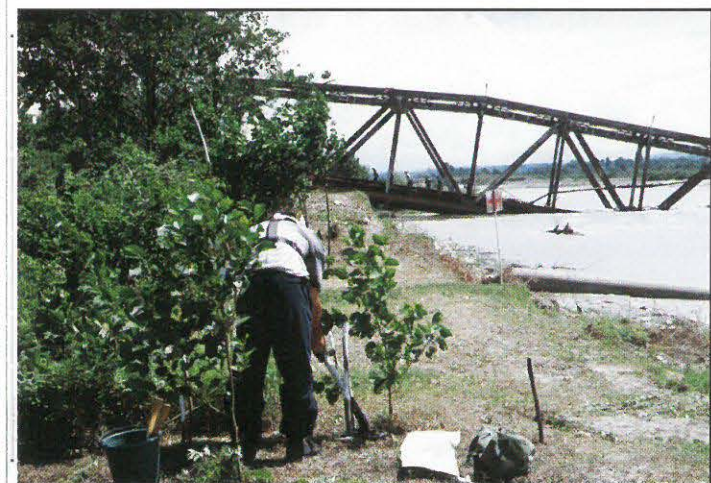
good use of the resources they had and mines very much played a part in their tactics. Despite low mine numbers overall, the perceived threat of mines, based largely on a history of accidents across Chechnya, did deny vast tracts of agricultural land and destroy a significant proportion of the working tractors that still operated in Chechnya. To help address this problem of low mine numbers over vast areas, HALO deployed Pearson rollers pushed by a Belarus (locally manufactured) tractor, which HALO had armored in the United Kingdom. The tractor/roller combination proved a great success and large tracts of agricultural land were quickly returned to productive use. HALO also deployed Volvo Medium Wheeled Loaders to Chechnya to clear the unexploded ordnance that lay buried in the rubble of former housing.

The recent conflict has almost certainly seen the deployment of additional mines and unexploded ordnance. Just how the Russians have deployed their mines is yet to be seen, however they did drop PFM-1s over the Georgian border area of Omalo last summer, so there is little doubt that they will have shown much reserve in Chechnya.

In the Caucasus, HALO has shown that wherever there is a well-educated, computer literate local population, it is possible to quickly and efficiently establish an effective and appropriate Mines Action Center at costs that can be sustained by the governments of mine-affected countries. ■

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Demining on the north bank of the Inguri River. In the distance, refugees are returning to Abkhazia.

Photo c/o HALO Trust



An anti-tank mine awaiting demolition in Chechnya and a FAB air dropped bomb in Abkhazia. The locals had attempted to destroy the bomb by shooting it.

Photo c/o HALO Trust



An armored Belarus tractor fitted with Pearson Mine Roller which HALO used in Abkhazia and Chechnya conducts an area reduction.

Photo c/o HALO Trust