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Mine Clearance Operations Set to Begin in Tajikistan

The OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) in conjunction with the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD) signed an agreement in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, at the end of May that will begin the first internationally-supported mine action program in Tajikistan. The following article provides a brief discussion of the landmine situation in Tajikistan and the goals of the new mine action project.

by Kevin Dansereau, MAIC
and Ian Clarke, FSD

Background to Landmine Problems in Tajikistan

In 1997, Tajikistan was classified as a mine-affected country after a civil war within Tajikistan that led to mines being laid throughout the country. The landmines left behind from the conflict made local farmers and the general population in Tajikistan at risk of landmine casualties. In addition, since 1997 more landmines have been set along both the Uzbekistan-Tajikistan border as well as the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border. Russia has acknowledged placing landmines along Tajikistan's borders, with approval of the Tajikistan government, in order to prevent unwanted terrorists from entering the area.¹ The most serious threat to Tajikistan's population appears to be the recently-laid mines along its borders because the areas tend to be more heavily-populated than the areas affected by the civil war. Farmers, children and travelers have been in the most serious danger of running into landmines as they go about their routine daily tasks. Unfortunately, the mines along the borders initially designed for security measures are in certain instances not well marked around the civilian population areas, resulting in civilian casualties along the borders.² There have been 105 mine-related accidents reported since 1997, and 24 incidents where livestock were either killed or injured. It also has become apparent that there are accidents occurring that have not been reported; these accidents have occurred in outlying villages and have not been reported due to the difficulty in communications between the district authoritative centers and the remote villages.

Steps Being Taken to Offset Landmine Problems in Tajikistan

The International Committee of the Red Cross invited the FSD to Tajikistan in July 2002 to carry-out an assessment mission to look at ways that the FSD could assist the government of the Republic of Tajikistan to establish a National Mine Action Strategy. The FSD Director held meetings with international organizations and government representatives, namely Deputy Prime Minister Zahurov. During these meetings it was requested that the FSD assist the government in the following ways:

- Request to the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) for their assistance in providing the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database system
- Assistance with the establishment of a National Mine Action Coordination Structure
- Donor mobilization
- Recruitment, training and equipment for two survey teams and two clearance teams
- Capacity building for national staff at all levels

For the latter part of 2002, the FSD sent a number of missions to Tajikistan to continue liaison between the donor communities and update government representatives on the progress of such contacts as well as the proposed future visit by representatives from the GICHD. In addition, following a request by the Tajik government, the OSCE Centre in Dushanbe initiated a process involving international agencies and governments that explained their interest in supporting mine action in Tajikistan.

Update on Current Project and Plans for the Future

Since February 2003, the FSD has deployed a permanent representative to Tajikistan who assisted Mr. Alan Arnold and Mr. Thomas Bollinger of the GICHD during their assessment visit, which took place from April 28–May 3, 2003. During this visit, meetings were held with representatives of the international community and representatives from national authorities, culminating in the formal request by Deputy Prime Minister Zuhurov for the assistance of the GICHD, by donating, installing and training national staff in the operation of the IMSMA database.

On May 29, 2003, the FSD signed an agreement with the OSCE to establish the first Humanitarian Mine Action program in Tajikistan. OSCE funded 40 percent of the program spending. Also contributing to the program are the Canadian government, the Karl Popper Foundation, Foundation SI Geneva and the Canton of Geneva. These initial funds will ensure the deployment of two survey teams, who will start surveying in the area of Tavildara and surrounding territories, in accordance with the Tajik Mine Action Plan.

On June 20, 2003, the FSD signed an agreement with the government of the Republic of Tajikistan, which sets the parameters of the working relations between both parties. With equipment now arriving in the country, it is envisioned that training will commence in mid to late July, with an estimated deployment date for the survey teams being the second week in August. A major inhibiting factor on demining operations in Tajikistan is the terrain and harsh weather conditions during the winter months; realistically, demining activities can only take place between March thru November, at best. It will be possible to conduct training courses on low-lying areas during February and March, which allows a demining season of eight to nine months.

Activities for 2004

The FSD is planning to start the 2004 season with two survey and two

Landmines in Europe & the Caucasus

clearance teams, and a total of 83 national staff. The survey teams will then concentrate their efforts on any remaining dangerous areas in the Tavildara region and expand their activities into Gona Badakshan, which is the next priority area on the Tajik Mine Action Plan. It is planned that the clearance teams will start on priority sites identified during the survey of the Tavildara region, as defined by the Tajik Mine Action Cell, which is being established this year by the Tajik authorities with the assistance of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). For clearance teams to be deployed to the priority sites, it is vital that sufficient funds are secured by the end of this year to enable the equipment to be purchased and imported by February 2004. This will enable a full season of survey and clearance activities to go ahead.

Capacity building is a major consideration. The Swiss Foundation for Mine Action is working closely with the government of the Re-

public of Tajikistan to establish a sustainable, National Mine Action capacity, ensuring the transfer of knowledge at all levels, from explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) operators to management positions. With continued support from the FSD and OSCE, Tajikistan is hoping to become mine-free in the near future. ■

References

- 1 Landmine Monitor 2002 on Tajikistan, <http://www.icbl.org/lm/2002/tajikistan.html> (Retrieved June 13, 2003).
- 2 OSCE, Project Proposal submitted March 31, 2003.
3. Information adopted from written report by Ian Clarke, Director of FSD, June 2003.

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