
Armenia's Mine Curse.

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AYGEHOVIT, Armenia, March 7, 2007 (ENS) - The village of Aygehovit on Armenia's north-eastern border with Azerbaijan is home to 3,400 people and blessed with wheat fields, green pastures and orchards.

The trouble is that because of mines sowed in the Karabakh conflict that ended in 1994, many of them are inaccessible.

"I have a pear orchard of seven thousand square metres on the border," said local farmer Vachagan Simonian. "Every year this orchard could bring in a crop of around seven thousand tonnes and I could sell it for around two thousand dollars - but I can't."

"People cannot till their land, they have no income, which is why they have to leave to work in Russia," said Aharon Asilbekian, deputy head of the village administration.

During the hostilities, the lands and mountains between Aygehovit and an Azerbaijani village on the other side of the border were repeatedly mined. There are still mines on around 450 hectares of land, roughly half of the village's plots and gardens.

Mined areas are to be found in five of Armenia's ten regions bordering Azerbaijan. As a result, large tracts of otherwise fertile farming land are lying idle. Seven people have been blown up after accidentally triggering mines since 1994, four of whom died.

Children are often the innocent victims of landmines. (Photo courtesy UN) "It happened seven years ago," Tornik Eganian told IWPR. "I was herding cows near the border. I knew the place well, as I'd been there many times before. I had never suspected that there could be landmines there. Then, all of a sudden there was an explosion, throwing me two or three metres back. And then I saw that one of my legs was missing."

Nowadays Eganian works as a watchman for a salary of \$3.50 a month and receives just \$3 more in disability benefit. Twice a year he goes to Yerevan to get a new artificial limb and special shoes, free of charge.

"No one takes care of a person, who's been disabled as a result of a landmine explosion, except for his family," said Jemma Hasratian, coordinator of Armenia's national committee for the prohibition of antipersonnel mines. "The state has no programme to support the victims, to give them jobs and higher benefits."

"Now there's a sign on the territory, where I lost my leg, warning villagers against going there," said Tornik. "If there is a peace settlement, it will be very difficult to work on the territories of our village. The entire place is covered in landmines. It's very dangerous."

Asilbekian said life was hard for the villagers, because they could not use the lands - but accepted that it was virtually impossible to have the area de-mined.

"We understand that so long as there's a threat of war, we cannot have the landmines removed," he said.

"We've avoided disturbing the mined territories for military purposes, but there are also mined areas that lie far from the borders," Colonel Araik Movsesian, head of the humanitarian mine-clearing centre, told IWPR. "We are going to clear these territories of landmines gradually."

During the Karabakh conflict, a number of villages in the border regions changed hands several times, alternately coming under control of the Armenian and Azerbaijani sides. Between 1991 and 1994, the areas were mined first by volunteer units and later soldiers from both sides, who rarely drew maps with the coordinates of the explosives, which makes things much harder for local people.

"Very often landmines were planted by people, who were not specialists, which makes it difficult to establish where exactly the landmines are and how far they are from one other," said Armen Grigorian, coordinator of the humanitarian mine-clearing programme.

"The defence ministry provided us with maps, but that wasn't enough."

A study carried out as part of the programme in 2005 revealed that there are around 300,000 square metres of mined territories in Armenia, which is nearly one per cent of the entire country.

"This is quite a lot for such a small mountainous country as Armenia, especially if we consider that landmines are most often planted on roads, including those leading to water sources, and bridges," said Grigorian.

Grigorian's centre, which is supported by the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, is working on a new strategic programme of action for the period up until 2010.

"We intend to clear all the territories of no military significance, that is 127,000 square metres," he went on. "To do this, we need big financial investments - around \$38 million."

Some 100,000 landmines remain in Armenia, a legacy of the conflict with neighbor Azerbaijan. (Photo courtesy Photolure) An estimated 69,000 residents in 60 villages in Armenia are afflicted by the problem.

"This year, we have cleared almost entirely the territory of the village Shurnukh in the Syunik region [in southern Armenia]," said Movsisian. "Before they withdrew from the village, the Azerbaijanis randomly mined arable lands, gardens and some of the forests. We got the job fully done in the village and cleared 215,000 square metres.

Locals can now cultivate their land without fear."

The village had suffered from mine explosions every year.

In the summer of 2000, Andranik Harutyunian found a round object in a field and pulled on the ring attached to it. The explosion left the boy an invalid. He still has a mine splinter stuck in his thigh. His family's monthly income is no more than \$60, and they can barely afford visits to doctors in Yerevan, 280 kilometres away.

Since 1994, Armenia has recorded 398 cases of people blown up by mines. In about a third of them, people were killed, with 16 deaths recorded in the last two years.

"The number of victims has been going down with time, as people

know where there may be landmines, though accidents are not totally avoidable," said Grigorian.

Signs saying "Danger! Landmines!" have been put up in almost all dangerous areas, but in some places they have been taken down.

"Villagers simply take down metal objects and use them for spades or axes," he said. "And it's impossible to stop them doing this."

"If a cow strays into a mine-laden field, the herder will follow it, thinking [mistakenly] that once the animal has not been blown up, he will be safe too," said Jemma Asratian.

"There's a lot of work to do," Colonel Movsisian told IWPR. "With efforts continuing at this rate, it will take ninety more years to destroy all landmines. We need more money to speed up the work."

Grigorian agrees, "If we continue at this rate, we will need a thousand years to clear the whole of Armenia of landmines."

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