

Azerbaijan's Struggle Against Landmines

Physical, Psychological, and Environmental Impacts

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Even after wars have ended, silent killers remain hidden underground for years, waiting for an unsuspecting victim to step on them. “When a war is over, I think it’s a cowardly thing to leave the war behind you in minefields that hit women and children and the most vulnerable.” So said Paul McCartney, who has used his unique fame to draw attention to the mine problem in the world and participated in campaigns against landmines.

Indeed, landmines are among the brutal legacies of wars, and today more than 80 countries in the world are struggling with mine problems. International reports [indicate](#) that nearly 5,000 people die each year in mine explosions, with 85 percent of these victims being civilians. Half of the civilian casualties are children.

Landmines are [classified](#) into two main categories: anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. [Anti-personnel mines](#) are smaller than anti-tank mines and are intended to kill or injure individuals. They can be triggered by very little pressure, sometimes as little as 5 to 15 kilograms, posing a significant threat to civilians. [Anti-tank mines](#) are designed to damage or destroy vehicles, including tanks and armored vehicles, and require significant pressure to detonate, typically over 100 kilograms, making them unlikely to be triggered by human footsteps.

Azerbaijan is among the countries most seriously affected by the global landmine problem.

The movement that started in the late 1980s in Armenia and in the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) of Azerbaijan to unite the latter with the

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former turned into a large-scale war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. During the First Karabakh War, Armenia occupied not only the former NKAO but also seven adjacent regions of Azerbaijan. As a result of this war, more than one million people from both sides lost their homes and became refugees and IDPs.

During Yerevan's three decades of occupation, Azerbaijani cities, towns, and villages were left devastated, looted, cleansed, and mined. After the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan successfully liberated most of its occupied territories. Subsequent to its anti-terrorist operation in September 2023 and in the wake of a bilateral agreement between the Azerbaijani-Armenian border determination commissions on [returning](#) of four Qazakh villages in April 2024, Azerbaijan took control of the entirety of its external borders with Armenia.

Although reconstruction efforts began promptly in the territories liberated from occupation, Azerbaijan continues to face significant challenges, one of which is due to these areas having been transformed into minefields during the 30-year occupation.

According to initial calculations, approximately 12 percent of Azerbaijan's territory is contaminated with 1.5 million mines and an unknown number of unexploded ordnances.

By the start of the Second Karabakh War, at least 3,441 Azerbaijani citizens have [suffered](#) from mines, including 358 children and 38 women. Following the end of the Second Karabakh War, 362 more people have been affected by mine explosions, with 69 Azerbaijani citizens tragically losing their lives.

After the end of the Second Karabakh War, Armenia had continued to lay mines in the regions controlled by Russian peacekeepers. According to Baku, new minefields covering 500 square kilometers were [laid](#), with additional mines being planted between 2020 and 2023.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov [stated](#) during his speech at a UN Security Council meeting in September 2023 that after the 10 November 2020 tripartite statement that ended the war, a total of 2,728 mines produced in Armenia in 2021 had been detected and neutralized in Azerbaijan since August 2022.

While writing this article, I interviewed people who suffered from landmine blasts. One of them was an employee of the Mine Action Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (ANAMA), Hasil Yusubov.

27-year old Hasil lost his foot in an anti-personnel mine explosion while he was working in the Syrkhavend village of the [Aghdere](#) district on 28 May 2024. He told me that the mine that took his foot was planted after the end of the Second Karabakh War.

Psychological Effects

Although major combat operations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have ended and the peace process continues to move forward, Azerbaijanis continue to be victims of Armenian landmines.

Beyond causing physical harm such as amputations, burns, and lacerations, landmines deeply affect the mental health of those who survive its effects. These injuries not only devastate the body but also lead to a loss of self-worth and a diminished sense of being fully human. Survivors often face significant [challenges](#) in reintegrating into society due to their reduced physical capabilities, which can lead to feelings of isolation and inadequacy.

The struggle to adapt to their new circumstances and the difficulties they face in finding employment exacerbate these challenges, further isolating survivors and hindering their social interactions. This sense of alienation can precipitate mental health issues like depression, alcoholism, and even thoughts of suicide.

According to Handicap International, many landmine survivors [grapple](#) with persistent psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The psychological effects of landmines on Azerbaijanis are far-reaching and enduring, impacting not only individual survivors but also their families and communities at large. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive support systems and resources to help survivors rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society.

For instance, the ANAMA employee mentioned above finds the day of the explosion deeply traumatic and prefers not to discuss it. He explains that even before the tragic incident, the psychological strain of working in such perilous conditions was considerable: “For those working in demining operations, even a small stress from the outside poses a risk to their lives.”

Furthermore, families who have lost loved ones to mine explosions face ongoing challenges in moving forward with their lives. Without adequate psychological support, the trauma of such losses can persist for many years, affecting all members of the families concerned.

One of the families I interviewed during my research with mine victims was the [Abishov](#) family. A member of the family, Azerbaijan State Television operator Siraj Abishov, died in a mine explosion in Kalbajar in June 2021. His loss is a difficult trauma for the family to overcome, and they say their lives have changed since his death. When discussing Siraj, family members often break into tears, unable to contain their grief. They frequently remember the tragic day, grappling with questions of how the incident could have been prevented.

The impact of these losses extends beyond the victims and their families, affecting all sectors of Azerbaijani society with anxiety and trauma. Reports of deaths and injuries from mine explosions appear regularly in Azerbaijani media, further worrying the community.

Azerbaijani internally displaced persons (IDPs), who have been awaiting the opportunity to return to their homes for over three decades, are deeply concerned about the danger posed by landmines to themselves and their families upon their return.

Environmental Effects

Mines and Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) not only threaten people's lives, they also cause serious damage to the environment. Wherever they are deployed, mines persist beyond their intended military purpose; even after conflicts end, they continue to contaminate the environment for decades.

Landmines and other ERW make land and other natural resources inaccessible and cause overuse of what is available, which also leads to soil degradation. Moreover, they [negatively affect](#) biodiversity through unplanned explosions or leakage of chemicals into the soil and water. Sometimes, mines become concealed under grass, necessitating its burning to clear affected areas. However, this practice poses risks to both the soil and the atmosphere.

Additionally, with the advent of global warming, the hazards posed by mines are escalating. Experts [warn](#) that floods and landslides can displace mines, rendering existing records of minefield locations unreliable. For instance, heavy rain and flooding in parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014 [necessitated](#) the re-evaluation of minefield maps.

Similarly, in Azerbaijan, regions that are contaminated by mines experienced floods this year. This raises the likelihood of incidents similar to those that took place in Bosnia occurring in Azerbaijan in the future. Moreover, heavy rains can impede mine clearance efforts by restricting access or hindering the operation of machinery and mine detection dogs, which are ineffective in wet conditions.

International Mine Clearance Support

A crucial challenge for Azerbaijan, following the liberation of its territories during and after the end of the Second Karabakh War, is the resettlement of these regions and the return of over 700,000 IDPs to their homes. However, mines present a significant barrier to reconstruction and resettlement efforts. The widespread placement of mines, not just along the contact line but also in cemeteries, houses, and residential roads, complicates Azerbaijan's task even further.

Landmines cost only \$3 to \$75 to make and lay but, using traditional techniques, cost an average of \$300 to \$1000 each to remove.

This high cost is a great burden for the Azerbaijani economy, which is primarily financing and carrying out reconstruction works in cities that were in ruins and whose entire infrastructure was destroyed during the occupation.

To date, ANAMA has cleared 140,000 hectares of land, removing 119,946 mines and unexploded ordnances. International experts [project](#) that it will take nearly 30 years and require an investment of \$25 billion to solve demining-related issues in Azerbaijan.

Another factor that makes mine operations difficult is the lack of mine maps. After the Second Karabakh War, although Azerbaijan [demanded](#) Armenia's mine maps, the other side first denied that these existed. Subsequently, the Armenian side [agreed](#) to exchange maps revealing the locations of 97,000 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines placed in the Aghdam region in return for the release of 15 Armenian soldiers captured on Azerbaijani territory following the end of the Second Karabakh War. The Azerbaijani side [says](#) that the mine maps provided by Armenia cover only 5 percent of the mined land and that the maps are only 25 percent accurate.

ANAMA's Hasil Yusubov highlights the challenges caused by inaccurate maps provided by Armenia during demining operations: "At times, the maps provided to us indicate three rows of mines in certain areas, but upon inspection, we often find only one row. Sometimes, mines are discovered on land shown as being mine-free on the map. Even if the location of the mines is shown incorrectly by even ten meters on the given map, the given map cannot be considered correct. Because even ten meters poses a risk to the lives of those working in the area."

Despite Azerbaijan's efforts to highlight the importance of accurate mine maps, insufficient attention from international organizations complicates efforts to solve the problem. Moreover, worldwide mine action organizations do not consistently [prioritize](#) Azerbaijan's mine issue. Often, reports by such NGOs mention the problem briefly, overlooking its true magnitude.

However, there are also notable initiatives deserving of praise.

Projects similar to those initiated by UNDP jointly with IEPF and two international NGOs (MAG and APOPO) in 2023 and financed by the EU can contribute to Azerbaijan's quest to rid its lands of mines. In late May 2023, APOPO [deployed](#) its specialized team, animals, and equipment to an operational base in Aghdam. The team conducted intensive acclimatization training for eight technical survey dogs and twelve mine detection rats, preparing them for accreditation by ANAMA. MAG

led the recruitment, training, and deployment of the first-ever female deminers in Azerbaijan, who received its international standards training, ensuring that operations are safe and effective.

Currently, Azerbaijan conducts 90 percent of its mine clearance operations using its own resources. However, there is a pressing need for financial and technical assistance to alleviate this burden. The hidden dangers posed by these underground killers should not only concern Azerbaijan, but also all states and NGOs that are engaged in combatting the scourge of landmines.

The Azerbaijani citizens who have been displaced from their homes for three decades deserve the opportunity to return to their villages and cities safely, reclaiming their lands without the threat to their lives posed by these stealthy killers.

“Once peace is declared, the landmine does not recognize that peace,” says Jody Williams, an American activist who co-founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). Hence, those who view peace between the peoples of Armenia and Azerbaijan as crucial for stability in the South Caucasus should step forward to more actively assist Azerbaijan in addressing its mine issues. There is no good reason for Azerbaijan to have to bear such a large part of the financial and technical burden alone.