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# ALBANIA'S EXPERIENCE IN SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF DEMINING



## **Albania's experience in solving the problem of demining**

The threat of land mines and similar devices in northeastern Albania stemmed from the Kosovo conflict. After a survey by the Albanian Armed Forces in 1999, 15,250,000 square meters of dangerous areas were identified. The threat was coming from anti-tank and anti-personnel mines planted by the former Yugoslav Republic, unexploded ordnance, subammunitions from jet artillery and at least six NATO cluster bombs launched into Albania.

An additional complication was the lack of minefield data in Albania. No mines or similar devices have been planted by Albania itself. In fact, NATO asked the country's internal army not to intervene in the conflict, and Albania had to watch helplessly as its territory was filled with explosives.

As for the placement of mines, Kukës Prefecture suffered the most. The prefecture has a population of almost 120,000 people, of whom 75 per cent live in rural areas. The population of Kukës is one of the poorest in Albania, if not in Europe. Landmines and similar devices directly threatened 39 villages. The main activities of the population of this area are cattle grazing, agriculture, harvesting of firewood and other livelihoods. Poverty and load on the land have been exacerbated by the fact that 75 percent of the north is mountainous, excluding mined land. Although most people were informed and trained in mine action, some died and were injured while working in mined areas due to economic pressures. From 1999 to January 2003, there were 202 landmine explosions.

In 2002, 88,379 square meters had to be demined with the help of Danish specialists and the Swiss Foundation for Mine Action to build a critical road between Bayram Kurri and Gjakova.

Mines have also resulted in difficulties with patrolling the borders between Albania and Kosovo, where trafficking and other crimes take place on a cross-border basis.

After the 1999 Kosovo crisis, the Albanian government responded quickly, trying to protect civilians in the first place. However, this was done without taking into account the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS), and all areas had to be re-cleared. Shortly after the cleanup, Albanian authorities explored the territory and found that most of the border area was still mined.

At the end of 1999, the Albanian government decided to adopt International Mine Action Standards and set up a framework for humanitarian mine action. An inter-ministerial body, the Albanian Mine Action Committee (AMAC), was established in October 1999 to properly coordinate mine action. This body is the executive body and the body that develops mine action policy in Albania. The Deputy Minister of Defense heads this committee, which also includes representatives of the Ministry of Environment, local self-government, persons responsible for decentralization, health care, public order, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finance and Economy; Permanent Representative of the United Nations Development Program, UN Representatives working on health issues, representatives of the Red Cross and other big donors.

The committee has the following tasks:

- ensuring the state's attention to mine action;
- seeking donor funding and assistance for the demining program;
- setting the priorities of resolving the issue of demining in Albania;
- informing the international community about the mine threat in Albania;
- compliance with the Ottawa Treaty on the Destruction of Anti-Personnel Mines.

At the same time, an operational body, the Albanian Mine Action Executive, was set up under the leadership of the committee to implement the mine action program.

Functions of this body:

- developing and facilitating the implementation of the mine action program;
- coordination, supervision and monitoring of all mine action activities that meet the committee's priorities;
- accreditation and confirmation of the quality of demining management activities;
- collection, verification and dissemination of statistics related to mining and other explosives in Albania;
- control and reporting on the progress of demining;
- survey and marking of mine-contaminated areas;
- development and maintenance of demining procedures based on UN standards;
- investigation of all mine incidents and emergencies;
- liaising with foreign mine action authorities.

It is important to note that the material support of the Albanian government from 1998 to 2003 for the implementation of mine action programs and disposal of explosives amounted to 1,583,600 US dollars.

In addition to the allocation of funds, Albania ratified the Ottawa Treaty on 29 February 2000, after which a mine clearance project was launched on 15 January 2001 with the assistance of Canada. Demilitarization was based on the return of mines and explosives, and recycling was a major aspect of the project.

Advantages of this project for Albania:

- Albania's compliance with Article 4 of the Ottawa Treaty;
- raising the status of Albania as a responsible party to the Ottawa Treaty;
- increasing national and regional security;
- socio-economic benefits for the people of Albania;
- strengthening the opportunities for demilitarization in the region;
- establishing the rate of destruction of stockpiles of mines and other similar devices in South-Eastern Europe.

A national seminar was held in June 2002 to set out a vision, mission, some priorities and a three-year demining plan. As a result of such an event, the following decisions were made:

1. Albania must be completely demined and free of any explosive devices by 2010.
2. Development and implementation of a sustainable mine action program to eliminate the effects of mines and similar explosive devices in northeastern Albania will be completed by 2005.
3. Objectives of the Albanian Mine Action Program:



- create a legal framework and mine action policy by 31 December 2003;
- implement the mine action policy, strategic plan and mine action priorities by 31 December 2003;
- develop and implement a national mine action database by 31 August 2003;
- make northeastern Albania clear of mines and similar devices by the end of 2005;
- Implement a mine awareness strategy on Albania's north-eastern border by 31 December 2003;
- ensure rehabilitation of those most affected by mines (permanent disability) by 2005, etc.

In 2002-2006, Albania made steady progress towards becoming a mine-free country. The National Mine Action Strategy was revised in August 2006. Following a review, the program set out the vision and strategic goals of the Albanian Mine Action Program by August 2010. The overall mission of the program was to develop and implement a sustainable mine action program to destroy all mines and unexploded ordnance by clearing all areas in northeastern Albania by 2010.

In 2006, a detailed "National Mine Action Plan to Complete Demining" for 2007-2010 was prepared as part of the Completion Initiative. The Albanian government presented it at various international mine action conferences and distributed it to various donors for possible funding.

The program has become a comprehensive, well-coordinated and accepted by all key stakeholders document. Donors unanimously stated that their funds were used effectively. This should be considered a worthy achievement, given the level of complexity of mine action management, the remoteness and underdeveloped infrastructure of the Kukes area, where most of the mines were located.

The program had many achievements that are worth noting, including:

- there have been no landmine casualties in Albania since 2005;
- all victims received medical care and support, and a wide range of people with disabilities benefited from the victim assistance program;
- the mine action program is closely coordinated with regional development priorities and territorial planning;
- effective coordination of the program by the committee, including the involvement and support of a wide range of parties: representatives of national and local authorities, donors, national and international non-governmental organizations and local communities.

The Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining assessed the Albanian Mine Action Program as follows:

- the program has benefited from close working relationship with highly efficient and committed implementing partners;
- the international community has provided consistent funding needed to meet the needs of the program since its inception in 1999.

The Ministry of Defense, acting as Chair of the Albanian Mine Action Committee (AMAC), has also played an important role in demonstrating government involvement in mine action.

The only shortcoming of the program is its inability to achieve the nationalization goals originally envisaged in 2002. Although the reasons for this were not entirely clear to the assessment team of the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining, they are more than offset by the program's huge success in reducing the risk of injury and death to almost zero.

Thus, by applying the above mechanisms, Albania has managed to actually solve the problem of mining, moreover, to receive positive feedback from the world community in this area. In connection with the above, we consider the experience of this country relevant and useful for Ukraine. Authorities and individuals in charge in Ukraine should take into account the legal mechanisms and tools used by the Government of Albania to address the same problem throughout our country that has been or is being mined. Adoption of this experience will allow to pass a way from dangerous mined zones across all territory of the state to quite safe situation much faster, and also, to avoid deaths and injuries of our citizens.

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