

Tajikistan's Mine Action Programme: Overview of Remaining Challenges and Needs

Tuesday, 21 November 2023

Introduction and participants

On 21 November 2023, Tajikistan and the Committee on the Enhancement of Cooperation and Assistance of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, with the support of the Implementation Support Unit, invited State and civil society representatives to engage in an open and frank discussion regarding Tajikistan's needs and challenges in implementing its obligations under Article 5 of the Convention by its 2025 Article 5 deadline.

Participants received a package including an invitation, agenda and background information on Tajikistan's mine action programme. These and other documents will be made available on Tajikistan's country page of the Convention website¹.

Participants

States: Austria, Japan, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States.

Organizations: European Union, Fondation suisse de déminage (FSD), Geneva Call, Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Mine Action Review, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), United Nations Development Program (UNDP),

Summary

Following welcome and introductory remarks on the Individualised Approach by Thailand, Chair of the Committee on the Enhancement of Cooperation and Assistance and moderator of the event, Mr. Firuz Odinazoda, Counsellor of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Tajikistan, provided opening remarks on behalf of Tajikistan. Followed by a presentation on the status and progress of Tajikistan's implementation of its Article 5 obligations by Major General Muhabbat Ibrohimzoda, Director of the Tajikistan National Mine Action Centre (TNMAC). The floor was then opened to representatives of organisations currently operating in Tajikistan to provide input and comment on the status of implementation. Participants then engaged in an informal discussion about possible cooperation and assistance in support of Tajikistan's mine clearance efforts.

Presentation

Major General Ibrohimzoda presented several key achievements and challenges of Tajikistan in implementation of its obligations under Article 5 of the Convention for the period of 2004 - 2023, noting that Tajikistan had released over 33,200,000 square metres of mined areas, resulting in the identification and destruction of 83,961 anti-personnel mines and anti-tank mines, as well as 36,380 items of explosive remnants of war. Major General Ibrohimzoda explained that of 25 districts, 7 are now considered "mine-free" and that as of September 2023, Tajikistan reported a remaining challenge of 162 hazardous areas measuring approximately 12,506,085 square metres contaminated by mines and other ERW remaining to be addressed, including 153 confirmed hazardous areas measuring 11,558,085 square metres and 9 suspected hazardous areas measuring 948,000 square metres.

¹ <https://www.apminebanconvention.org/en/membership/tajikistan/>

Major General Ibrohimzoda provided specific updates in the implementation of Tajikistan's second request for extension requested by Tajikistan for the implementation of its Article 5 obligations (2019-2025) noting a remaining challenge at the time of the request of 8,848,210 square metres, and that target for the extension period was to address a total of 6,539,291 square metres. Major General Ibrohimzoda reported that as of September 2023 Tajikistan had addressed 6,224,099 square metres (95% of project target), with an estimated 2,300,000 square metres remaining of the overall goal. Of the total area addressed 50% is reported to be used as pastoral land and for crop production directly impacting returnees, post-conflict reconstruction and economic development. Tajikistan also highlighted that land is returned to the population for agricultural activities, pasturing, gardening, construction of channels for irrigation and safe drinking water and that all these efforts significantly contribute to adaptation to climate change.

Major General Ibrohimzoda highlighted that although significant progress had been made by Tajikistan and its implementing partners, previously unknown mined areas with no minefield records continue to be identified, with a total of 51 previously unknown mined areas measuring and estimated 9,000,000 square metres having been identified during the extension period, of which a total of 772,000 square metres cancelled, and 3,600,000 square metres cleared.

Major General Ibrohimzoda provided an overview of Tajikistan's updated work plan, (2023-2025), indicating that all mined areas have been allocated to demining partners operating in Tajikistan. He added that mine action in Tajikistan is constrained by several factors, including; mountainous topography resulting in short demining seasons, with rain, snow and hot weather further limiting operational windows. These challenges include landslides, floods and avalanches which have resulted in migration of mines and changes in the depth of mines. Major General Ibrohimzoda also mentioned that security issues constrained progress. Major General Ibrohimzoda indicated that an estimated 500,000 people live in or near mined areas, with risk activities including collection of firewood, wild harvesting, and sheparding of livestock. In this regard, Tajikistan reported a total of 889 landmine victims, including 351 deaths and 538 injured.

Tajikistan highlighted that with additional resources it would Tajikistan would be in a position to address its remaining Article 5 challenge by 2025. However, without additional capacity it is likely that Tajikistan will require an extension of its 2025 deadline, currently projected to 2030.

In this regard, Tajikistan expressed its appreciation to its current donors, the United States, OSCE, Norway, and partners, FSD, NPA, GICHD, ICRC and the ISU.

Discussion

Fondation Suisse de Déminage (FSD) noted its 21-year collaboration with Tajikistan and shared their commitment to supporting Tajikistan to complete its Article 5 obligations. FSD explained that they had adapted their support through the years according to the plan and capacities available, including manual clearance operations, use of mechanical assets, and weapon and ammunition management, with current operations focused on supporting mine clearance.

FSD mentioned that while mine action donors are focusing on new countries, more attention should be placed to supporting States Parties that are close to the completion such as Tajikistan which is a dependable partner.

FSD explained that its support extends beyond clearance to include disposal of pesticides, food security, and climate change resilience and are fully committed to support Tajikistan to complete the job by 2025 and recognised the valuable work being done by Tajikistan.

Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) mentioned that they enjoy the full support of TNMAC and the Government and thanked them for their collaboration. NPA further highlighted the strong

collaboration of other international and national organisations. NPA reiterated that funding was a core challenge.

NPA expressed support for the possible need for Tajikistan to submit a future extension request of its Article 5 deadline. NPA explained that they had previously deployed six demining teams but that due to current funding levels capacity was reduced to five teams. NPA noted that it has the equipment, the energy and could expand very quickly with adequate donor support.

NPA described that climate change and its impact on the environment is another significant challenge having reduced work period to nine months a year. Tajikistan is now, due to climate change, experiencing increasingly extreme weather, including earlier snow fall, and extreme heat in other areas, these factors result in a reduction of the number of daily working hours causing delays in operations. NPA added that they are also working on the border with Afghanistan, and the security context can also limit operations. Given, these constraints, NPA noted that the programme as a whole is able to release 1,000,000 square metres a year. With a remaining challenge of 12,500,000 square metres, NPA noted that Tajikistan will not meet the aspirational goal of 2025, and on this basis would require up to a further 12 years of operations.

NPA further reported that they have an all-female demining. NPA further mentioned that many staff members of this team are seeking other opportunities as salaries are not compatible to those of other sectors. NPA also indicated that inflation and the rise in the cost of living is making a significant difference and that the amount that we have been paying, for example, for the last three years may not be sufficient to retain staff. In response, NPA noted that they are developing a new strategy to make sure that they meet the needs on the ground.

NPA explained that it has enjoyed support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the United States. NPA expressed its appreciation to these donors but also noted that current funding is insufficient, and there is a need to expand the donor group as well as the level of contributions. NPA has been engaged in Tajikistan since 2010 and so far, addressed over 153 mined areas, releasing an estimated 11,000,000 square metres of land, resulting in the destruction of over 30,000 landmines and explosive remnants of war.

NPA expressed its commitment to support Tajikistan in finishing the job by its completion deadline. However, NPA pointed out that the programme needs further support and without additional support and the generous support of donors they would not be able to meet the obligations by their upcoming deadline.

The United States thanked Tajikistan for the presentation. The United States mentioned that it is proud to be a long supporter of Tajikistan, and that it has provided over US \$35 million in funding assistance to the Tajikistan mine action programme. Including US \$2.5 million in assistance for the 2023-2024 fiscal year. The United States congratulated Tajikistan for the progress made, particularly in survey, as well as its role in regional programming.

The United States emphasized that Tajikistan has shown leadership in integrating female deminers into their teams and are close to their 2025 goal and hope to continue providing support in this area.

The United States also mentioned that in support of these efforts Tajikistan will require assistance from other donors and through the Individualised Approach and other efforts, and that the United States will continue to support Tajikistan to get them to the finish line.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) thanked Tajikistan for providing information on the status of implementation. In this regard, the UNDP asked if Tajikistan could elaborate on the clearance methods used to address mined areas and if there were any geographical or thematic priorities driving planning. The UNDP also enquired if any donors had been approached with concept notes on projects based on thematic areas of the Convention or geographical priorities.

Major General Ibrohimzoda, mentioned that UNDP has been involved in Mine Action in Tajikistan from 2003 up to 2014 and that during this time mine action in Tajikistan was supported by UNDP. The Director expressed his hope that UNDP can again return and work to support mine action in Tajikistan, with the focus on completion. The Director added that as a State Party to the Convention, Tajikistan implements all thematic areas of the Convention, including clearance, mine risk education, victim assistance and advocacy.

The Director explained that Tajikistan's second extension request, (2019-2025) outlined a plan for survey and clearance of all known mined areas and added that when Tajikistan submitted its second extension request, the current capacities and additional capacities required to reach completion by 2025 were also included. However, several barriers prevented Tajikistan receiving the funds required to increase capacity and that, unfortunately, Tajikistan did not receive the funding required. Currently, based on Tajikistan's current survey and clearance capacities, the TNAC projects that Tajikistan will be in a position to address all known mined areas (excluding the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border) by the end of 2030.

The Director added that Tajikistan's Updated Work plan included a budget, estimating US \$21 million would be needed to complete its Article 5 obligations by 2025.

Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) complemented the response by the director noting that Tajikistan has strong leadership and has very practical national standards which the programme continually works to improve, and that based on NPA's data there has been on average of 50% cancellation and reduction rate, with an average of 50% full clearance on tasks.

NPA also mentioned that in terms of impact, one key aspect is border security management. NPA recalled that the border guard force has a plan to construct 18 border posts and to construct a road along these border areas. Mine Action is releasing land on which the road and border posts are to be constructed in order to improve border security. In this way, further contributing to national security as well as improving access to mining operations, water resources and agriculture areas.

NPA added that the Tajikistan Mine Action Programme is now organising a national awareness workshop on environmental impact of demining, particularly in areas such as, national parks, and that for Tajikistan to start promoting tourism in some of these areas we need to eliminate the landmine threats.

NPA also added that new contamination is being identified and poses a challenge. In this regard, while Tajikistan addresses a lot of its contamination each year, due to the identification of previously unknown mined areas it re-establishes an annual baseline.

Fondation Suisse de Déminage (FSD) explained that the northern Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border area is also reported to be contaminated with anti-personnel mines. Yet, survey has not yet been able to be conducted. FSD made the point that at some stage a survey of these areas will need to be undertaken and that Tajikistan's baseline may increase as a result.

Major General Ibrohimzoda highlighted other challenges including the mountainous environment of Tajikistan limiting operations in high altitude to 60 days per year. The Director also explained that this terrain makes it difficult for the deployment of machines and mine detection dogs. In this case, the programme relies on manual demining operations averaging around 25 or 30 square metres per day. The Director also provided an overview of Tajikistan's mine action plan, explaining that the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre provides detailed annual plans to its implementing partners to address on average 1.5 million square metres per year with the current capacity.

Geneva call asked for information on Tajikistan's advocacy efforts and if Tajikistan would be interested in joining joint their advocacy efforts. Geneva call explained that there is an opportunity to build on the positive work that the TNMAC has accomplished. It needs to be known, acknowledged, and recognised so that other States Parties can adopt similar policies.

Major General Ibrohimzoda responded by explaining that Tajikistan has adopted several advocacy documents, including a Mine Action Strategy and is open to discussing ways to increase Tajikistan's capacity. In this regard, Major General Ibrohimzoda also explained that Tajikistan also has obligations under the Convention for risk education and victim assistance activities.

NPA took the floor to offer some supporting remarks, mentioning that TNMAC is organising an Inter-Ministerial Committee forum in December that donors will be invited to and that these keys message will also be shared. NPA also mentioned that International Mine Action Day on 4th April is another important opportunity for demonstrating the importance of mine action and that representatives of Tajikistan's mine action programme also seek to take advantage of the UNMAS mine action directors meeting in 2024 and aim to get Tajikistan on the agenda of the Mine Action Support Group.

NPA also explained that there is potential of increasing capacity. For example, FSD has two demining machines that, because of lack of funding, are not utilised to the extent possible. NPA also re-affirmed that their programme has equipment ready for 6 teams.

ICBL requested information on the projected reduction of clearance outputs over the coming years as indicated in Tajikistan's presentation, and that, while recognising the complexity of clearing Tajikistan's border with Uzbekistan, if it be foreseeable that there was a possibility of a resolution and clearance by 2030.

Major General Ibrohimzoda in response explained that if there was a doubling of Tajikistan's capacity, Tajikistan could release all currently known mined areas by 2025.

However, Major General Ibrohimzoda explained that during survey 9 million square metres of additional mined area was identified, with the majority of these mined areas identified during road construction in the Tajik-Afghan border areas in one of the most contaminated districts, *Shamsuddin Shohin*. In this district, the Ministry of Transport and Border Guards undertook road construction and the mine action programme provided survey. In this way, the contamination presented concerns mined areas located near the Tajik-Afghan border only.

Japan thanked Tajikistan for the presentation and indicated that the information shared will be shared to relevant agencies, including Japan's cooperation Bureau and Japan's Embassy in Dushanbe. Japan explained that the Government of Japan had a border control project, in

cooperation with UNDP equivalent to US \$4,000,000 last year, and that this project does not include a demining component.

Japan proposed that in the future, possible cooperation could be proposed between TNMAC, UNDP and other relevant implementing partners to ensure mine action is included in development plans. At this stage, although mine action is important, Embassies may not be fully aware of the role mine action can play in development. Japan mentioned that one idea could be that mine action is linked as one of the components of a development project. In this regard, Japan encouraged Tajikistan to coordinate with other agencies in developing projects for presentation to Japan or other Governments.

Major General Ibrohimzoda thanked Japan for the proposal and mentioned that Japan had been a strong supporter of Tajikistan since the beginning of the mine action programme, with support of FSD. The Director added that each year the TNMAC reports to the Commission of Humanitarian Law, which we have invited to Japan Embassy to participate. The Director thanked Japan for its input and find effective ways to cooperate with the other agencies, such as UNDP who works directly in the border areas and we can improve our activities.

Closing Summary and follow up

In closing, **Thailand** thanked all those who took the floor and expressed appreciation to all those present for their attendance. Thailand provided an overview of the way forward, including continued engagement by the Committee with Tajikistan over the coming year and thanked Tajikistan for their strong national ownership and clear work plan which demonstrates a strong positive example of implementation.

Major General Ibrohimzoda provided closing remarks thanking all those present for their participation and support to Tajikistan's mine action programme. Major General Ibrohimzoda also noted that in 2024 Tajikistan will begin drafting a third request to extend its mine clearance deadline (for submission 31 March 2025) with the support of the Implementation Support Unit and the Committee on Article 5 Implementation.

Major General Ibrohimzoda invited all past, present, and new donors to be part of Tajikistan's final steps towards completing its mine clearance obligations and indicated that Tajikistan will continue its engagement with its stakeholders including by sharing any relevant information on its mine action programme.

For further information on the Mine Action Program in Tajikistan please direct all queries to:

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