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## **RUSSIA CLEARS MINES IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH, FACILITATES REFUGEE RETURNS**

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The Russian Defense Ministry announced on Sunday that its peacekeeping troops have defused 16,000 explosives in the recently liberated Nagorno-Karabakh region and added that more than 130 refugees have returned to their hometowns in the region recently.

Explosives have been removed from an area larger than 400 hectares (980 acres) as well as from along 152 kilometers (95 miles) of highway and 617 buildings, including social facilities, the ministry said. Uran-6 systems were used to clear the area, which helped peacekeepers to work more easily under harsh weather conditions and in a mountainous area, the ministry said. Uran-6 mine-clearing robots are multifunctioning systems produced by JSC 766 UPTK for the Russian army.

According to the ministry's statement, quoted by Sputnik Turkey, more than 130 refugees returned to their hometowns in the region thanks to these latest efforts. So far, since the end of the conflict back in November 2019, more than 47,100 refugees have returned to Nagorno-Karabakh, the ministry added.

Nagorno-Karabakh lies within Azerbaijan but was under Armenian occupation since a separatist war there ended in 1994. That conflict left the predominantly Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh region and substantial surrounding territories in Yerevan's hands. Heavy fighting erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan in late September in the biggest escalation of the decades-old conflict, killing more than 5,600 people on both sides. The Russia-brokered agreement last month ended the recent fighting in which the Azerbaijani army routed Armenia's forces. The cease-fire deal stipulated that Yerevan hand over some areas it held outside Nagorno-Karabakh's borders. Baku also retained control over the areas of Nagorno-Karabakh that it had taken during the armed conflict.

Around 2,000 Russian peacekeepers have been deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh under the terms of the deal and are expected to stay in the region for at least five years. The Turkish Parliament also last month overwhelmingly approved the deployment of Turkish peacekeeping troops to Azerbaijan after Turkey and Russia signed an agreement for establishing a joint center to monitor the cease-fire in the region. The mandate allows Turkish forces to be stationed at a security center for one year. Azerbaijan has been pushing for its close ally Turkey to play a central role in the implementation of the agreement, as Ankara pledged full support for Baku during fighting in the region.

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