
ARMENIAN LANDMINES THREATEN THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

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Clearing landmines in the Nagorno-Karabakh region will take years since Armenia refuses to share the minefield maps with Azerbaijan.

Landmines planted by Armenian forces have killed several dozen civilians in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, even though a year has passed since the cease-fire was established between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

During several years of the Armenian occupation, the Nagorno-Karabakh was turned into a ticking time bomb, with Armenian forces planting hundreds of thousands of landmines in the region.

To avoid civilian casualties, Azerbaijan now demands mine maps from Armenia to clean up the area, a request Armenia has turned down.

On October 18, Azerbaijan called on the International Court of Justice to order Armenia to hand over the maps.

Before last year's war, the population of Nagorno-Karabakh was estimated to be 150,000. During the war, at least 90,000 ethnic Armenians have reportedly fled the region. Now the remaining population is at the risk of getting killed and injured by the minefield. The danger posed by explosives also affects returning displaced families who have been separated from their ancestral lands for nearly 30 years.

Although the mine clearing process has already begun, Azerbaijan claims it could take more than a decade to remove them all without access to the landmine maps.

The biggest responsibility and risk falls on the shoulders of the teams who clear the mines by searching every inch of land.

Mine clearance activities are carried out by the Azerbaijan Mine Clearing Agency, ANAMA, while the Azerbaijani army fortress units and the special mine search and clearance teams of the Turkish army also contribute to the demining activities.

'Armenia has mine production facilities'

Natig Asadov, ANAMA area manager, said that Armenia has mine production facilities and the teams mostly detected such mines.

"Armenia did not provide all of the mine maps. And we are searching every inch. We searched an area of 171,000 square meters in our area of responsibility, found 177 anti-personnel, one anti-tank mine, and one missile, and neutralized them," Asadov said.

"We are lacking the mine maps and this fact makes our work difficult, but we will continue our duty until the lands are fully cleared," he added.

Karim Hasanov, a mine search specialist, said that he has been dealing with mines for 21 years.

"Thank God our lands were liberated. Now it is time for us to exert our talent. Mine clearance is a very difficult job, but we get over it. We will clear our land of mines and give it to our people".

Zaur Imanov, a person in charge of the team training with dogs in the field, said that the sniffer dogs contribute to mine exploration activities.

"Our dogs detected a large number of mines and ammunition. They detect it by smell. They work long terms with their trainers. Instructors are also experts in their fields," he said.

He also said that dogs are specially selected from an early age group and undergo special training. They have the ability to find mines and ordinances up to 20 centimeters deep underground.

Here's the latest TRT World documentary that captures the impact of landmines in the region.

ANAMAs head of operations, Idris Ismayilov, said last year that "it will take up to 10 years to completely demine the territory but people would be able to return to their ancestral lands in between three and five years.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev recently said Armenia has given only a few maps to Azerbaijan and they have an accuracy of about 25 percent.

Azerbaijan also wants Armenia to stop planting new mines and to refrain from any actions that would foster hatred and discrimination.

Azeri Deputy Foreign Minister Elnur Mammadov stressed that the alleged campaign of placing landmines "is quite simply a continuation of Armenia's decades-long ethnic cleansing operation and an attempt to keep these territories cleansed of Azerbaijanis".

Azerbaijan and Armenia accuse each other of violating the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, to which both countries are parties.

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