

Towards a mine-free Tajikistan

Leaving no stone unturned



BY MICHAEL UNLAND

Michael Unland: What's it like to have a job where one is exposed to what many consider the most pernicious remnants of conflict?

Mike Storey: We carry out our demining work in accordance with internationally accepted levels of risk. Personally, I believe that if you follow procedures correctly, starting out from a known safe area, you actually run less risk than you do, for example, when trying to cross a busy main road in a big city. But if you flout the rules and take shortcuts, it's like placing a paper bag over your head while crossing the same street.

Clearing landmines involves following a set process in a rigid and professional manner. This is the approach we take in teaching the Tajik teams how to identify dangerous areas, delineate the exact boundaries of suspected minefields, and destroy explosive remnants of war. They're taught, for example, that they always have to demine in an uphill direction, since doing it downhill can cause them to lose their balance or trip and roll down onto a mine field.

Are you saying there is no emotional aspect to it?

There is! Every mine that's taken out of the ground and destroyed means lives saved. The satisfying thing about this job is that

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Ottawa Convention, also known as the Mine Ban Treaty, which is the most comprehensive international instrument for ridding the world of the scourge of anti-personnel mines. Since 2003, the OSCE has been part of these global efforts through its mine action programme in Tajikistan, with the help of its main implementing partner, *Fondation Suisse de Déminage* (Swiss Foundation for Mine Action), under the national co-ordinating body, the Tajik Mine Action Centre. In an interview for the *OSCE Magazine* on the mine-clearance process, Mike Storey, Project Adviser at the Foundation, says a mine-free Tajikistan is attainable, provided donor funding continues to flow in to accelerate the encouraging results achieved so far. A Dutch national born in Zimbabwe, Mr. Storey spent more than two years working on mine clearance in Sudan. He completed training in explosive ordnance disposal in Kenya's International Mine Action Training Centre.

Deminers and supervisors gear up for a long, hard day.



FSD (SWISS FOUNDATION FOR MINE ACTION)

it has a direct, immediate benefit for others. That's the emotional part. It is very different from organizing workshops or handing out pamphlets.

Can't accidents be completely avoided?

Human error figures to a large extent in every accident, just as in many other industries. A supervisor, for example, might miscalculate the risk or the type of mines or the size of the area. We are not robots.

Do you set out with a goal of clearing a certain number of mines a day?

We don't look at it from that point of view. Sometimes after working long and hard over a large tract of land, we don't come up with a single mine. That's fine. What counts is how much land previously suspected to be mined can be handed over to communities for their productive use.

So, often what you're doing is actually not eradicating mines, but fear?

Absolutely. A landmine is an "area denial weapon". If a mine blast accidentally kills or injures someone, it doesn't matter how small or how large the site is; you can be sure people will stay away from that area out of fear. About 93 per cent of Tajikistan is mountainous terrain and there is not much arable land to begin with, so every bit of agricultural land that is left idle means rural communities are being denied an asset of great value.

Are there certain discernible patterns in the way mines are laid out?

In Mozambique and Sudan, where I worked, randomly placed mines are quite frequent. We call them "nuisance mines": Just enough of them are placed to keep people away from the whole area. In the case of Tajikistan, when the Russian forces handed over mined areas on the Afghan border to the Tajik authorities in 2005, they also provided maps showing how the mines were laid out. These are reliable and make demining easier, since one of the most difficult tasks in demining is to accurately identify the minefield borders.

In contrast, there are no records relating to the areas that were mined during the civil war near Garm in central Tajikistan. Some people recall that the place was strewn with mines, but they are not sure exactly where. So we can spend years clearing these areas and not come up with anything.

How is the co-operation between the Tajik authorities and the demining teams?

The Government of Tajikistan has created a positive working environment. There is full co-operation from all units and all divisions — whether it's the army, border security or emergency services. It's the authorities who assign the personnel — mostly servicemen from the Tajik Defence Ministry — to be trained by us. We're provided with maps and some facilities. In many countries where



OSCE/ALEXANDER SADRICOV

Project Adviser
Mike Storey

Now in its fifth year, the OSCE-FSD demining programme in Tajikistan has:

- Carried out technical surveys in more than 1,000 villages, marking dangerous areas and enabling priorities for clearance to be set;
 - Identified more than 100 mined areas;
 - Cleared an area totalling close to 500,000 sq m;
 - Destroyed 2,264 anti-personnel mines, three anti-tank mines, 753 other items of unexploded ordnance and 4,096 rounds of small-arms ammunition;
 - Handed 10 cleared sites over to local communities for their safe use;
 - Provided or arranged 29 training courses for medics, surveyors, deminers, team leaders, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) operators and data-base personnel; and
 - Trained more than 350 national deminers.
- Website of Tajikistan's National Mine Action Plan: www.mineaction.tj

I've worked, the government actually hinders you from doing your job. Over here, it's totally the opposite.

How do landmines in border areas affect surveillance and security?

The mines that were planted along the Tajik-Afghan border in the early 1990s now prevent patrolling from taking place and checkpoints and observation towers from being built. These infested areas are inaccessible not only to smugglers and militants — the intended target group — but also to border guards. Mines don't discriminate, so before certain border surveillance methods can be implemented, the mines have to be cleared.

Do you see any end in sight to Tajikistan's landmine dilemma?

Tajikistan is, in fact, one of the few countries where there is light at the end of the tunnel. The problem is relatively small and manageable and there is a strong political will to solve it. However, if we continue going about it at the current pace, it is going to take decades. We need to boost our capacity, bring in mechanical mine clearance machines to help us, hire more survey and clearance teams, and obtain more funding for all the activities.

Once we've managed to do this, we will be able to accomplish so much more. We've been here for four years now; we know what we are doing, we have very experienced people out in the field, and the project is at an advanced stage. We are like a greyhound in a box eager to run.

Do you think it's realistic for the country to meet its set goal under the Ottawa Convention and complete its mine clearance by April 2010? That's less than three years away.

I can't put a date on it, but I can tell you that the more experienced and more confident we become, the more land we will be able to clear. In 2006, we covered 100 per cent more territory than we did in 2005, with less resources. Can you imagine what we could do this year, and in 2008, 2009 and 2010, once we've increased our capacity? We could definitely solve the problem in the foreseeable future. And that is the challenge.

By acceding to the Ottawa Convention in 1999, the Tajik Government left no doubt that it was serious about pursuing its vision of a Tajikistan safe from the negative humanitarian and economic impact of landmines. In 2004, the authorities destroyed their last stockpiles — more than 3,000 mines. Now it is just the stuff buried in the ground that's waiting to be tackled. Unfortunately, the country does not have the means to fulfil this commitment, and so we are appealing to donor countries' generosity and sense of responsibility to step in and help Tajikistan reach its objective.

Michael Unland is a Media Officer in the OSCE Centre in Dushanbe. He was a radio and online journalist before moving on to development work in Germany, Chile, Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. He was responsible for several communication projects at the UNDP and Mercycorps.

Mine action in Tajikistan

Main donors: Canada, the OSCE and Germany

Other donors: Belgium, France, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom

2007 budget: \$3.7 million; to date, the OSCE, the UNDP and donor governments have provided \$1.4 million.

Personnel: four international and 160 national staff organized into four manual clearance teams.

According to official sources, some 25 million sq m of Tajikistan's territory were contaminated by anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnance:

- In the early 1990s, along the southern Tajik-Afghan border;
- During the civil war (1992-1997), especially in central Tajikistan; and
- In 2000, on the Tajik-Uzbek border, in the east and north of the country.

Over the past 15 years, 277 citizens of Tajikistan have been killed and 300 have been injured by landmine accidents. More than 20 per cent of them were children from poor rural areas.

Under the OSCE-FSD programme, 12 mine-detecting dogs, trained in Afghanistan, have been helping reduce suspected mined areas since mid-2006.



The people of Pahtakor



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Bearing the brunt of landmines and their ripple effects

BY ALEXANDER SADIKOV

“This is dead land,” says Lolahon. “The water has destroyed it.” The old man in worn-out clothes shows me around the small village of Pahtakor, in the southern Panj district of Khatlon.

Pahtakor lies along the 1,350 km-long border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, parts of which are said to have been heavily mined by Russian border troops in the early 1990s to protect it from smugglers and militant groups. The area has been chosen as the focus of the start of this year’s demining season. Because of harsh weather conditions during the winter months, demining work can take place only between March and November, at best.

As we walk along a dusty road, the wind wafts the odour of fetid earth from waterlogged fields. Clusters of clay homes look abandoned. The surrounding fields are wet and devoid of any vegetation, a sharp contrast to the green spring fields elsewhere in the country.

Pahtakor was once known for its farm products. Through a web of hundreds of canals, the Panj River supplied the water that irrigated this arid area, enabling its inhabitants to grow cotton. Then, what had worked for hundreds of years came to a stop during the civil war, when the canal that drained the water into the Panj was mined. With no way out, the water gradually turned the fertile land into a swamp.

“These canals meant everything to us:

They gave us our bread, our life and our hope,” said Ranohon Saidova, deputy head of Quldimon, the *jamoat* (local self-government unit) that has borne the brunt of the catastrophe.

“We used to clean the canals every year. But now we’ve stopped; the water does not go anywhere anyway, as the downstream canal is mined.”

Several elders of the *jamoat* had invited me to the local school where they wanted to talk to me about their problems.

“Water has already destroyed seven houses in the village of Gushon,” says a village elder, looking weary. “And in Quldimon, about 76 hectares of land have been lost to water. Several of our cattle — which we simply cannot afford to lose — have been infected with diseases.”

And then there is the worrying impact on human health. The swampy area provides an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes. According to Hudoyberdi Saidov, deputy head of the Tropical Disease Centre in Panj, more than 115 people in the area were diagnosed with malaria in 2006.

Five-year-old Munis was among them. His family’s two-storey house is only 10 metres from a waterlogged area. “There are just too many mosquitoes here in the summer,” said Munis’s mother, Sabohat Mirzoeva. “They bite us and there’s nothing we can do about it. All we can do is hope that they are not malaria-carrying mosquitoes.”

Alexander Sadikov is a Senior Press and Public Information Assistant in the OSCE Centre in Dushanbe. A university graduate in international relations and journalism, he comes from the tiny mountain town of Panjakent in northern Tajikistan on the Uzbek border.

Educating communities throughout Tajikistan about land mines is a key task of the mine action programme.

Managing porous borders on the “roof of the world”



Explored by Marco Polo, conquered by Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, and turned into a neutral buffer zone between the British and Russians during the “Great Game”, the Pamir Mountains and their surroundings have seen their share of action and drama. In July 2006, an OSCE borders team embarked on a 12-day trip to the “roof of the world” (see map on page 31) to make an on-site assessment of Tajikistan’s capacity to secure and manage its porous southern border with Afghanistan and its eastern border with China.

BY HENRY BOLTON

In June 2006, Tajikistan requested the OSCE’s assistance in identifying exactly how its domestic agencies could best tackle the host of daunting challenges it faced regarding its borders.

To be able to analyse the situation as accurately as possible, we needed to drive up to and across the Pamir Mountains, which soar up to 7,600 metres. Travelling to this rugged and isolated corner of the world over poor roads required complex and meticulous planning with the help of various offices in the Secretariat, the OSCE Centre in Dushanbe and the Tajik Delegation to the OSCE.

Furthermore, the mountain ranges are located in the south and east of the country in the autonomous Gorno Badakhshan *oblast*. We would be able to enter this area only if we obtained special clearances and internal visas from the Tajik Government.

In the early hours of 21 July, after an eight-hour stopover in Istanbul, Jarek Pietrusiewicz, Johann Wagner, Kathleen

Samuel and I, all from the Conflict Prevention Centre, landed in Dushanbe. By 8.30 a.m., we were holding the first of what would be a round of 35 meetings with a whole range of government ministries and departments and international donors.

Early on 23 July, we were joined by Riccardo Lepri from the Centre in Dushanbe and Major Abdul Vaghel, our escort from the Tajik Border Guard. Having made sure that each of our three four-wheel-drive vehicles was equipped with two spare wheels, 60 litres of water, extra fuel, radio and satellite phone communications and food supplies, we set off on our 2,000 km journey.

Having driven over the most incredible terrain, we were greeted with a temperature of 51°C in Nizhniy Panj, where we met representatives of two border posts and a border crossing. The River Panj, a tributary of the Amu Darya, Central Asia’s longest river, runs along the entire length of the Tajik-Afghan border. Previously known as the Oxus, these were the waters that Alexander the Great crossed in 329 B.C. in pursuit of the Persian nobleman Bessus.

We headed north-east and east along the northern bank of the River Panj towards Kulyab. No rest stop was ever more welcome than our overnight stay at the UNDP guest-house in the town. The next day, we crossed the internal boundary between Khatlon *oblast* and Gorno Badakhshan as we entered the autonomous province. At the border guard base in Khal-e-Khum, we were briefed on the border situation: Sightings of

Ishkashim is the southernmost border crossing point with Afghanistan.
Photo: OSCE/Johann Wagner

armed groups and cross-border exchanges of fire are apparently not uncommon here.

It was soon after leaving the area that we spotted, just about mid-stream in the River Panj, a basic but functional volleyball court on an islet between a Tajik village on the one side and an Afghan village on the other. Long live cross-border co-operation!

The further east we travelled, the more interesting the food became, which was to reach a climax in the Pamirs. We continued on to Khorugh, capital of Gorno Badakhshan, studying border guard facilities on the way. After a 14-hour journey along dirt roads, we were rewarded with comfortable local accommodation, where we spent the first of two nights.

On the morning of 25 July, having replenished our supply of drinking water (we were consuming five litres per person a day), we gathered at the regional border guard headquarters in Khorugh, a potential site for training activities focusing on border patrolling under a proposed OSCE project. Just like most of the camps currently run by Tajikistan, this one was inherited from the Russian Border Guard when they handed over the task of border security to the national authorities in 2005. The facilities are reasonably sound and solid, but they are ageing and badly need basic refurbishing.

Following discussions with the commander of the regional border guard and his staff, we left Khorugh on an eight-hour round trip: Along some rough tracks, we followed the Panj through its gorge to Ishkashim, the southernmost Tajik border crossing point with Afghanistan, at the mouth of the Wakhan corridor and only about 15 km from the Pakistani border.

This is where the “Great Game” played out in the nineteenth century, when Britain and Russia signed a treaty adding a strip of the Wakhan corridor to Afghanistan to create a neutral buffer zone between their two empires.

Ishkashim provided us with some welcome diversion. As we were having lunch, a young British couple appeared out of nowhere and approached us for help: Halfway through a round-the-world journey, their four-wheel-drive vehicle had broken down.

We returned to spend a second night in Khorugh, to give ourselves time to become acclimatized to the altitude in preparation for our ascent into the Pamirs the following day. This was more than simply a matter of comfort. If one climbs too rapidly (more than 350-500 metres per day) above 2,500

metres, one could suffer from altitude sickness, which, if not treated properly, can lead to cerebral or pulmonary edema — an often fatal condition.

After the routine morning check of our vehicles and communications equipment, we headed off, up into the Shughnan Mountains and the Pamirs. We were treated to stunning scenery. In the more fertile patches of the mountains, we spotted occasional single-level mud brick houses that are typical of the lower-lying areas of the Panj. Gradually, though, the vegetation made way for desert surrounded by snow-capped mountain ranges.

Eventually, we arrived in Murghab, capital of the Pamirs. Tajikistan’s highest town at over 4,000 metres, it is a regional trading hub. Chinese traders transit through the town en route to the interiors of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, as they must have been doing since the days of Marco Polo.

During the Soviet era, a large military garrison was stationed at Murghab to defend Tajikistan from the threat of Chinese invasion. The landscape is dotted with traditional low buildings, *yurts* (portable dwellings) and nomadic Kyrgyz herding their yaks.

However, Murghab was of interest to us for other reasons: It is the site of the main customs clearance facility for the Chinese border, and the last population centre before reaching the Chinese frontier and the border crossing point at the Kulma Pass, 98 km away, across the desert.

The next day, we headed across the Aksu Plain desert, east to the Kulma Pass and

On the way to the Tajik-Afghan border through the Pamir Mountains.



OSCE/HENRY BOLTON



OSCE/HENRY BOLTON

At the Kulma Pass, looking out to the Chinese border from Tajikistan.

the Chinese border. At 4,365 metres above sea level, the Kulma Pass is in the middle of nowhere. In the winter, the temperatures plunge to -60°C , which explains why the border is closed throughout the winter months. On the day of our visit, though, it was $+43^{\circ}\text{C}$.

Since the Kulma Pass is Tajikistan's only border crossing with China — the rest of the frontier being fenced and patrolled by armed guards on both sides — it is a vital transit point for commercial trade and is, therefore, crucial to the Tajik economy. At the same time, it is a potential route for trafficking of precursor chemicals — essential for the processing of heroin — to Afghanistan. Having satisfied ourselves that, indeed, the OSCE could be of assistance at Kulma, we

Henry Bolton (right) and friends in front of the border team's lodgings in Murghab.



OSCE

returned for our second night in Murghab before setting off the next day for the Tajik-Kyrgyz border.

We drove north, past Lake Sasyk-Kul, and through the ex-Soviet army garrison of Kara Kul and the Khargush Pamir hills to the Kyzyl-Art Pass and the border crossing from Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan. Here the Border Guard are on duty for seven months at a stretch — 15 km away from the nearest water supply and without any access to transport.

From there we entered Kyrgyzstan to continue our journey via the OSCE Field Office at Osh and the Centre in Bishkek, where we held meetings with the Kyrgyz authorities on their own border security and management concerns.

Following the assessment visit, the OSCE has proposed four specific assistance projects for Tajikistan:

Development of a national border strategy. Providing the Tajik Government with technical assistance in drafting a national border strategy;

Patrol programming and leadership on the Tajik-Afghan Border. Providing trainers with the skills and knowledge necessary to conduct human surveillance of the Tajik-Afghan border;

Enhancement of immigration controls. Building Tajik capacity to detect false, stolen and lost travel documents and develop common national data recording and reporting procedures; and

Customs assistance on the Tajik-Chinese border. Refurbishing and equipping of the Tajik customs clearance facility at Murghab to enhance its capacity to detect precursor chemicals, other illegal goods and contraband.

In addition, the idea of establishing an OSCE centre in the country focusing on regional border management is under discussion.

Henry Bolton, Senior Border Issues Adviser in the OSCE since June 2006, has served the Government of the United Kingdom, the British Army, the European Commission, the United Nations and several OSCE field operations. His assignments, ranging from supervising international police monitors to drawing up integrated border management strategies, have taken him to Canada, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Georgia, the Balkans and Central America.

Arms and ammunition

Out of harm's way with more than a little help from Tajikistan's friends



What do the OSCE Delegations of Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Sweden and the United States, and most recently, Andorra, Belgium and Spain have in common? All are members of an informal “Group of Friends of Tajikistan” that have made it a prime priority to help protect the country’s population from the environmental and security hazards posed by massive reserves of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and conventional ammunition — a grim legacy of six years of civil strife.

BY WILLIAM PRYOR

In 2003, when the OSCE set up a mechanism within the Forum for Security Cooperation to help participating States build their capacity to destroy and manage their surplus of small arms, light weapons and ammunition, Tajikistan was among the first to seek assistance.

Under a weapons amnesty after the civil war, the authorities were left with a staggering cache of tens of thousands of small arms and more than 20 tonnes of high explosives. On a visit to Tajikistan’s central storage facility in August 2004, experts led by the OSCE’s Conflict Prevention Centre confirmed the Government’s worst fears: The conditions under which the stockpiles were being kept and the level of skills of the personnel responsible for guarding them were completely unacceptable by any safety and security standards.

Apart from environmental accidents waiting to happen, the possibility of terrorists gaining access to this dangerous loot or its

diversion to illegal markets was simply too great. There was no time to lose. A comprehensive, tailor-made programme was launched in June 2005. Today, its first phase, focusing on the Dushanbe area, is about to be completed.

The results speak for themselves. The Tajik authorities have:

- Built a destruction site for ammunition at Lohur, near Dushanbe;
- Trained nine experts in the disposal of explosive ordnance;
- Destroyed 34 tonnes of high explosives;
- Built and equipped a facility for the destruction of SALW at Lohur;
- Destroyed 26,000 rifles and pistols, including AK-47 and AK-74 assault rifles and Makarov pistols; and
- Either built or upgraded seven storage sites in Dushanbe for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Drug Control Agency, the General Prosecutor’s Office, the Military Prosecutor’s Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Tax and Revenue Ministry, and the State Border Protection Committee.

Alexander Anoshkin, project manager, explains why implementation has gone extremely well so far.

“Firstly, the Tajik authorities themselves have demonstrated unstinting support for our joint efforts, including identifying qualified and enthusiastic partners within the relevant government agencies. Secondly, the Group of Friends of Tajikistan has put its

Safe and secure storage facilities for SALW and ammunition have been built under the OSCE programme with the help of Sweden, Slovenia and the Netherlands.
Photo: OSCE/Tom Schröder



OSCE/SUSANNA LOOF



Hydraulic shears are used to cut weapons at the Interior Ministry's destruction facility.

OSCE/SUSANNA LOOF

Lt. Col. Morten Lødøen briefs visitors on how hazardous material is stored.

money where its mouth is, mobilizing more than €730,000 in support of the first phase.”

To find out how the operations were progressing, representatives of five donor countries went to Lohur as part of a visit to Tajikistan in April. They saw for themselves how a newly refurbished facility had enabled the Ministry of Defence to manage the destruction of more than 34 tonnes of ammunition and explosives in the past year and a half.

“I am impressed with the results so far and am encouraged to recommend our continued support for the programme’s next phase,” said Misa Kangaste, the Finnish Delegation’s Military Adviser.

His counterpart in the Norwegian Delegation, Tom Schröder, agreed. “We are all satisfied with the way the OSCE Centre and the Tajik authorities have been co-operating to enhance security, not only for the good of the citizens here but also for the OSCE area as a whole,” he said.

Both officials are active participants in the Forum for Security Co-operation, which meets weekly in Vienna to discuss and take decisions regarding military aspects of security in the OSCE region. Other countries that have asked for help in addressing the threats stemming from the uncontrolled proliferation and destabilizing accumulation of SALW and conventional ammunition are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Montenegro, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

The Group of Friends of Tajikistan also travelled to several areas in the southern region of Khatlon that were potential storage sites for SALW.

“We should all welcome the fact that Tajikistan is so conscientious about storing hazardous equipment in accordance with best practices,” said Lt. Col. Morten Lødøen,

who has been seconded by Norway to serve as the programme’s chief technical adviser. “By doing this, the country is able to keep its stockpiles out of the reach of potential criminal elements.”

LOOKING AHEAD

Nothing succeeds like success, so in late 2006, in response to requests from several national agencies that the programme should be extended, the OSCE Centre in Dushanbe designed and launched the next series of activities. Measures include:

- Disposing of surplus rocket boosters;
- Building capacity for the disposal of improvised explosive devices (sometimes referred to as IEDs, or roadside bombs);
- Constructing storage facilities for SALW and conventional ammunition throughout the country’s regions;
- Constructing a storage facility for conventional ammunition; and
- Providing training in the handling of ammunition and management of stockpiles.

Not surprisingly, all this comes with a hefty price tag: more than €1.5 million, of which half a million euros are still being sought.

“The benefits, however, are priceless and promise to set Tajikistan on a clear course towards serving as a model for stockpile management in the OSCE region,” says Alexander Anoshkin.

“We have high hopes that the second phase will complete the country’s efforts to set up needed facilities, with qualified experts, to manage stockpiles responsibly and effectively — not only right now but also far into the future.”

William Pryor is the OSCE Field Officer in Kulyab in southern Tajikistan.