

Rapid demining of Karabakh requires transparency and accountability from the government of Azerbaijan

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Demining of the occupied territories of Karabakh is carried out according to the measures (projects) provided for in the State Program for the Restoration and Sustainable Development of the Occupied Territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2021-2025, which has yet to be. In their official statements, the leaders of the central government body that carries out demining activities in the country - the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA) - present the schedule of demining in Karabakh as follows: first of all, the areas through which communications pass, residential and non-residential facilities to be restored and built, and, of course, arable lands prepared for the companies of officials.

ANAMA, which was established on July 18, 1998, under the name of the National Agency for Demining the Territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and became the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action with the status of a public legal entity on January 15, 2021, does not have an official website. The agency only uses social networks, especially Facebook¹ and Twitter², publishes weekly information about the areas cleared of mines and unexploded ordnance, and shares short press releases about meetings and visits with relevant international organizations. At the same time, it provides final monthly indicators on antipersonnel and antivehicle mines defused by all government bodies (ANAMA, Ministry of Defense, Special Risk Demining Regiment of the Ministry of Emergency Situations, State Border Service, and Internal Troops) engaged in demining activities in Karabakh, unexploded military ammunition, and cleared area.

President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, announced the number of mines buried by Armenia in the territories of Karabakh liberated from occupation as a result of the 44-day war in late 2020 at the plenary session of the 6th Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia in Astana: "According to preliminary estimates, Armenia buried more than one million mines during the occupation. According to international experts' calculations, Azerbaijan needs about 30 years and 25 billion US dollars to solve the issue of demining the territories."³

Ilham Aliyev's statement certainly raised reasonable questions in Azerbaijani society. Some of them (main questions) will be considered and answered in this article. The first question concerns the use of the number of buried mines as an indicator that reflects the accurate picture. In other words, can the number of mines buried be taken as a basis for indicating the extent of mine contamination? According to the criteria of international organizations engaged in humanitarian demining activities, more than the number of mines is needed to understand the accurate picture of contamination and to prepare estimated costs (required costs) of demining. In international

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/anama.gov.az>

² https://twitter.com/ANAMA_gov_az

³ https://azertag.az/xeber/Prezident_Ilham_Aliyev_Azərbaycana_eraşilerin_minalardan_temizlenmesi_uchun_texminen_30_il_ve_25_milyard_ABS_dollari_lazimdir-2331560

practice, the indicator of the area of mined territories is used for this. Page 54 of the 140-page report, entitled "Landmine Monitor 2021"⁴ and jointly prepared by two international organizations with great experience and reputation in the field of banning mines, cluster bombs, and demining - the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997, and the Cluster Munition Coalition (CMC), states, *"In Azerbaijan, contamination comprised five km² of antipersonnel mine contamination (1.5km² CHA and 3.5km² SHA) and 8.71km² of antivehicle mine contamination (1.79km² CHA and 6.92km² SHA). The survey is needed to assess the extent of contamination due to changes in control of parts of Nagorno-Karabakh after the conflict in 2020."* Later, the "Landmine Monitor" report announced that the mined areas in Karabakh could be from 350km² to 830km².

It is essential to accurately determine the area of land contaminated by various mines and munitions in the territories liberated from occupation. This indicator allows you to directly calculate the duration and required demining costs. It should be noted that after the 44-day war, the officials of ANAMA gave different numbers, such as "3-5 years" and "10-15 years," as the period for cleaning Karabakh from mines. However, it is inappropriate to talk about any reasonable calculation here. When calculating the time and costs of demining, terrain relief, level of mine contamination (low, medium, high), and many other factors that create difficulties (type of antipersonnel mine, presence of antivehicle mine, presence of surprise mine, the natural migration of mine, depth of burial, weather conditions, the density of grass cover, etc.) should be taken into account.

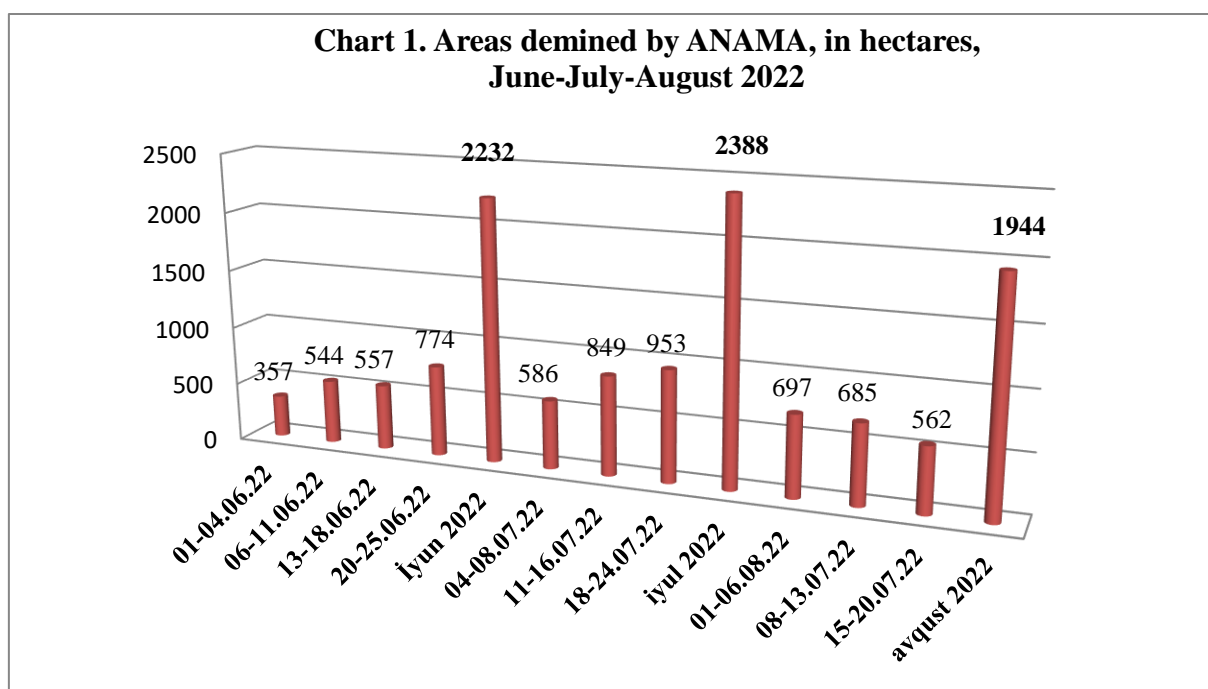
First, let's consider the stages of demining activities because this factor directly affects the duration. To determine the area contaminated by mines, first of all, the area is surveyed. At this time, drones with cameras installed are used. Changes in the area, anomalies in the soil, dropped military ammunition, fortifications, etc., are studied, and a decision is made about the area. Then the technical intelligence team starts work, and the area is physically intervened. This work is carried out through remotely controlled robotic machines, access lines are opened to the studied area from different directions, and the boundaries of the mined area are determined. It is also possible to use dogs during operations. Then demining operations are carried out. In the end, mines and unexploded ammunition are neutralized. It should be noted that areas highly contaminated with mines are cleaned mechanically (manually).

Let's go back to the main factors that make demining difficult. Usually, antipersonnel mines are buried at a depth of 5 cm, which is considered sufficient to be hidden in the ground. However, mines buried deep in the liberated territories of Karabakh are also found. They are mines laid for the future of the civilian population. Such mines are more challenging to detect and neutralize. This means an increase in labor and time consumption. In particular, antivehicle mines can be buried deeper. Depending on the type of mines (plastic mines, etc.), there is also a degree of difficulty in detecting them. Mines are more challenging to detect in areas with dense grass cover. As a result of the natural displacement of lands and landslides in the occupied territories for 30

⁴ <http://www.the-monitor.org/media/3318354/Landmine-Monitor-2021-Web.pdf? x tr sl=auto& x tr tl=en& x tr hl=auto& x tr sch=http>

years, mines can migrate, fall more profound, and settle in an undesirable form in the soil, which makes it challenging to defuse them. In addition to the above, neutralization of anti-tank mines in the area according to international standards includes the stages of inspection, traction (to determine the presence of surprise mines), and destruction, which consumes additional time. Bad weather can also be added to the challenging factors.

The mentioned factors manifest themselves in the process of cleaning Karabakh from mines. Therefore, there are differences in the weekly and monthly cleared areas. Chart 1⁵ shows the area of territories cleared by ANAMA by weeks and months in three months of 2022 (June-July-August). From the chart, it is possible to see fluctuations on a monthly and weekly basis. It is impossible to talk about some increasing dynamics here because demining indicators (number of mines, number of unexploded ammunition, cleared area) also change depending on the difficulty level of demining areas. For example, although the area of demined land increased by 156 hectares in July compared to June, in August, 288 hectares less area was cleared compared to June, and 444 hectares less compared to July.



Another important point regarding the demining of the territories liberated from occupation is the claim that international financial support is not provided to Azerbaijan, which is facing a humanitarian disaster caused by Armenians. In April of this year, Ilham Aliyev, speaking at the international conference held at ADA University on the topic "South Caucasus: Development and Cooperation," stated that no international organization had helped Azerbaijan in demining: "... We need the support of international NGOs dealing with landmines. None of them have considered Azerbaijan yet. We know that there are several NGOs and foundations that help with mine clearance. When it is our issue, no one is helping. All works carried out in the liberated areas

⁵ The chart was prepared by the author of the article based on the official statistics of ANAMA.

are carried out at the expense of the state budget of Azerbaijan. We have not received a single dollar from any country or international organization."

The President is right that NGOs have a significant role in humanitarian demining activities. However, the unhealthy environment formed for the exercise of civil society in Azerbaijan, the prohibition of international cooperation by legislation, the restriction of the activities of international organizations and funds in our country, and most importantly, the high risk of corruption and non-transparency of the project implemented under the name of reconstruction of Karabakh at the expense of the state budget prevents organizations specialized in humanitarian demining from working in the territories liberated from occupation.

The only reason why UNMAS (United Nations Mine Action Service), which is considered one of the world's largest organizations in the field of humanitarian mine action, is mainly financed by the budget allocated by the UN General Assembly and voluntary contributions of donor countries (\$64,806,304 budget⁶ in 2021) and has worked in countries such as Niger, Nigeria, Syria, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, South Sudan, and Somalia, does not work in Azerbaijan is that the current Azerbaijani authorities ignore the principles of accountability and transparency. Although the delegation led by the Chairman of the Board of ANAMA, Vugar Suleymanov, who was on a visit to the USA in September of this year, also met with the director of UNMAS⁷, there still needs to be a concrete result. Azerbaijan wants technical support from the organization. They will visit Azerbaijan to study the situation on the spot. The exact date of the trip is not known.

Today, Azerbaijan cooperates with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in mine clearance in Karabakh. According to official information, between 2000 and 2020, ANAMA, together with UNDP, neutralized 800,000 mines and unexploded ammunition.⁸

Azerbaijan should try to benefit from countries that have made high contributions to humanitarian demining activities in Azerbaijan, such as Germany (\$13,005,399), Japan (\$8,766,194), Great Britain (\$7,995,128), Denmark (\$5,815,062), Italy (\$3,402,264), and the European Union (\$13,005,399).⁹

As for the head of state's accusation that he did not receive help from any foreign country or international organization in clearing mines, this does not reflect reality. The amount and distribution of assistance received by Azerbaijan in connection with demining activities after the 44-day war is shown in Chart 2¹⁰. Our country received financial support from the United States, Great Britain, the European Union, and the United Nations. Furthermore, ANAMA has cooperated with the Marshall Heritage Institute of the United States since the late 90s. Since October 2022, since 2005, the Institute has provided ANAMA with 60 mine-detecting dogs. By

⁶ https://www.unmas.org/sites/default/files/annual_report_high_res_0.pdf

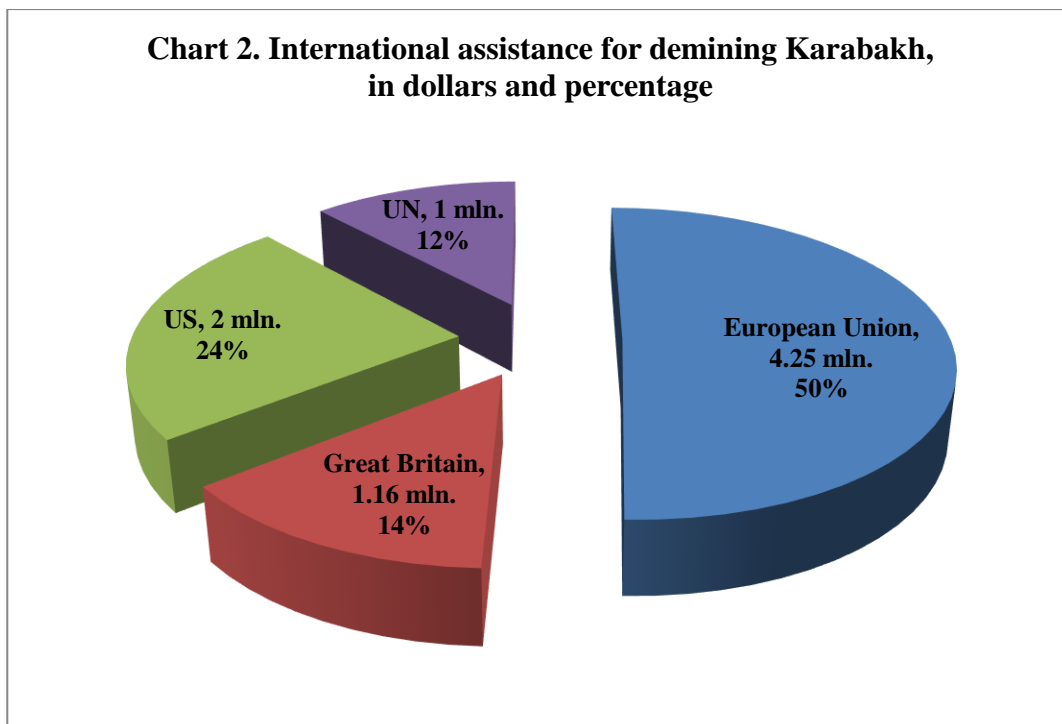
⁷ https://azertag.az/xeber/Azerbaycan_numayende_heyetinin_ABS_a_seferi_basa_chatib_VIDEO-2296412?fbclid=IwAR2h0lqG-aEk6ES_GvcVi5Ujgn70i36QoMUi_Wu4-ff6v9HY1wyWLLF8HDA

⁸ <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2021/04/1400082>

⁹ The figures are taken from the UNMAS report for 2021.

¹⁰ The chart was compiled by the author of the article based on information from official sources.

the summer of 2023, 15 more mine-detecting dogs will be given, and the total number of dogs presented to ANAMA will reach 75.¹¹ We should note here that specially trained dogs are without equal in demining. In addition to the Institute, an agreement was reached between ANAMA and the US's European Command on conducting "Explosive Ordnance Disposal" training for ANAMA instructors by the Command, as well as presenting and testing new equipment used in demining operations.¹²



Today, the activities related to demining the liberated territories of Karabakh are being continued, albeit slowly. From November 10, 2020, to December 31, 2021, ANAMA neutralized 10,472 antipersonnel and 4,775 anti-tank mines, discovered 13,214 unexploded ordnance, and cleared 6,777 hectares of mines.¹³

According to the official information of the Ministry of Defense, more than 27,960 hectares of land were cleared of mines by the engineering and fortification units of the ministry until October 15-22. In total, 9,726 pieces of antipersonnel mines, 2,485 pieces of anti-tank mines, and 10,316 pieces of unexploded ammunition were detected and destroyed.¹⁴ It is interesting that the units of the Ministry of Defense in the liberated areas, in addition to settlements, roads, and infrastructure facilities, also demine agricultural fields for the companies of officials.

¹¹https://azertag.az/xeber/Marsal_Irsi_Institutu_ANAMA_nin_komandasini_ABS_da_2022_ci_ilin_en_yaxsi_kolle_ktivi_elan_edib_VIDEO-2339705

¹²<https://www.amerikaninsesi.org/a/6739545.html>

¹³ Source: ANAMA

¹⁴<https://mod.gov.az/az/news/azad-edilmis-erazilerde-muhendis-teminati-uzre-tedbirler-davam-etdirilir-video-43260.html>

In the first nine months of 2022, the operations carried out by the bodies involved in demining the territories liberated from occupation have been presented.¹⁵

	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	Total, in the first nine months, accommodation by rows
Antipersonnel mine	32	96	68	341	546	303	578	2 353	1 695	6 012
Anti-tank mine	27	63	97	482	279	236	105	689	747	2 725
Unexploded ordnance	230	601	298	673	1021	1 273	1 028	1 161	1 363	7648
Cleared area, hectares	402,7	379,6	306,7	1 701,5	2 098,8	2 723,4	6 903,27	5 523,74	4 064,06	24 103,77

¹⁵ The table was compiled by the author of the article based on the data of ANAMA.