



Prisoners of the Caucasus: How Nagorno-Karabakh's Minefield Crisis Holds the Peace Process Hostage

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Background

Since the end of the first Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1994, landmines and unexploded ordinance continue to directly impact the livelihoods and health of Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh – the major impediment to peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan – began in 1988 when the parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh voted to secede from the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic to join the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. Low-intensity violence flared up into open warfare between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the collapse of the Soviet Union, with Armenian forces occupying Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding Azerbaijani districts. The territories are still contaminated by anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, as well as unexploded ordinance from bombs and cluster munitions used by both sides.

Casualties related to mines and unexploded ordinance in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories are the highest per capita in the world, with children comprising over 25 percent of the casualties.¹ Between 1995 and 2019, casualties from landmines and unexploded ordinance (UXO) reached 388 – 81 of whom were killed.² In 2000, the UK-based NGO Halo Trust, which specializes in demining and mine safety education, established itself in Nagorno-Karabakh. Since its arrival, Halo Trust has focused on surveying confirmed and suspected minefields and areas contaminated by unexploded ordinance, establishing local mine action groups to assist in gathering information, and educating the local population in mine safety measures.

While this report focuses more broadly on the issue of landmine and UXO land contamination in Nagorno-Karabakh, given Halo Trust's position at the forefront of landmine clearance in the region, special focus will be given to analyzing the results of Halo Trust's operation as a case study.

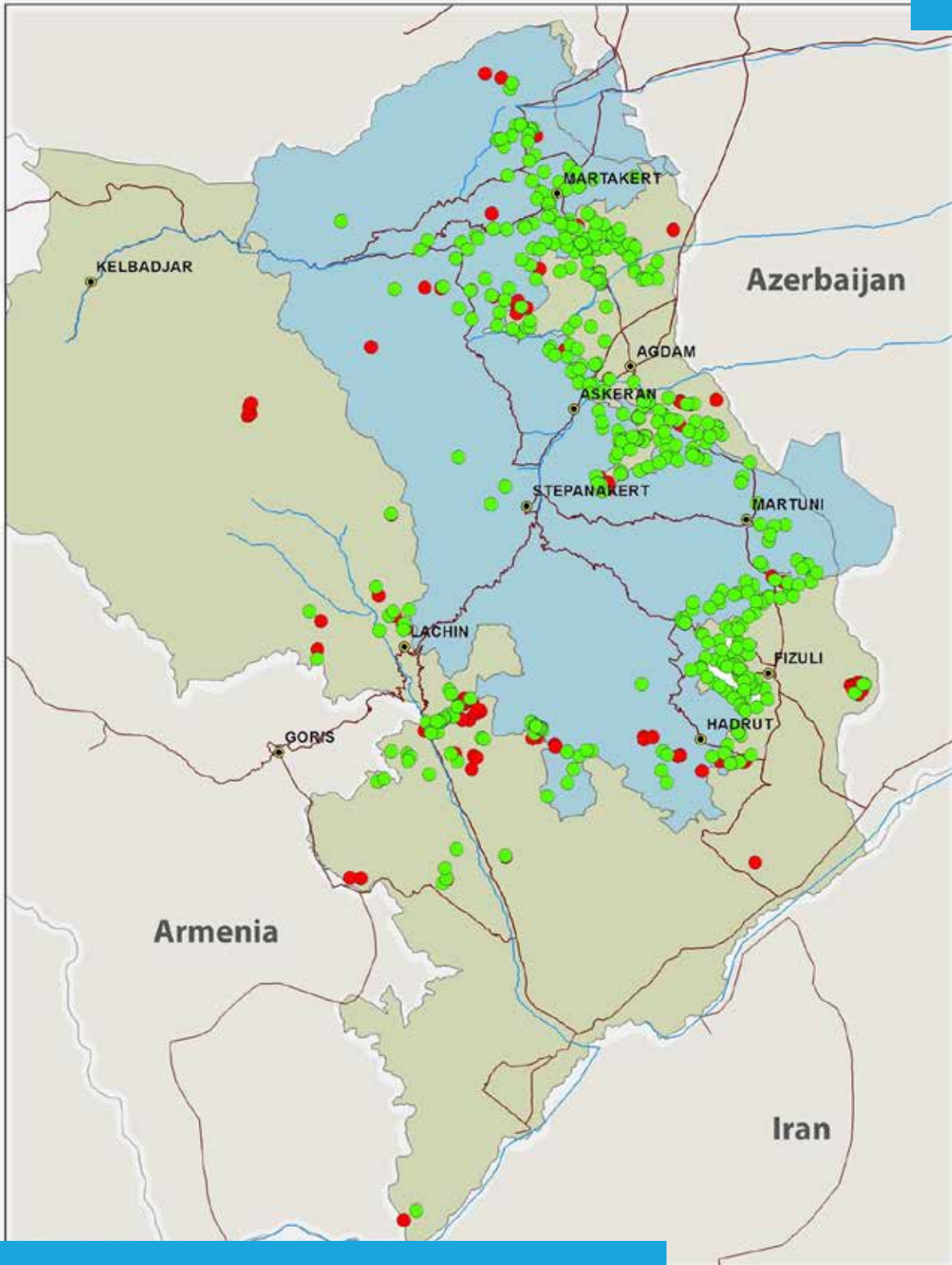
¹ <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2020/nagorno-karabakh/impact.aspx>

² Ibid.



Status

Map Displaying Decommissioned and Remaining Minefields in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories.



Halo Trust has cleared around 500 minefields, destroying 4000 landmines and 8000 items of unexploded ordinance.^{3,4} These actions have directly impacted over 130,000 lives. In addition to clearing minefields and destroying mines and UXO, Halo Trust has provided education in mine safety; local schools now have Halo Trust provided material to schools so that children learn how to avoid mines and UXO.⁵

While Halo Trust has made some impressive strides in land clearance in Nagorno-Karabakh, many challenges prevent making the region safe. According to a 2020 report by Mine Action Review, land surveys by Halo Trust begun in 2019 (to be concluded in 2022) have shown a significant increase in landmine and cluster munition contamination.⁶ Anti-personnel landmine contamination has risen to 4.81 square miles, with 125 confirmed hazardous areas (CHA) covering 2.93 square miles – up from 70 CHA in 2019 and 2.34 square miles in 2018.⁷ This is out of a total CHA of between 217 to 528 square miles according to the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action (ANAMA).⁸

Meanwhile, cluster munition remnants (CMR) contaminate an area covering 43.79 square miles across Nagorno-Karabakh and the occupied territories.⁹ With Halo Trust's land survey to last until 2022, and taking into account the recent 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, land contamination by mines and CMR and other UXO is likely much larger than currently known.

In fact, the increase in contaminated land is symptomatic of the issues facing the region; while Halo Trust can clear mines, CMR, and UXO, war flare-ups undo their efforts. In 2013, General Movses Hakobyan confirmed that his Nagorno-Karabakh Defense Forces remined areas along the line of contact between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan in order to deter Azerbaijani saboteurs.¹⁰ In 2016, the 4-Day War contaminated an additional 1.49 square miles with CMR.¹¹ The recent 2020 war has seen additional CMR and UXO dropped on Nagorno-Karabakh and the territories, with ammunition dumps in places like Stepanakert/Khankendi exploding, creating even more land contamination.¹² And evidence shows Armenian usage of Russian made, nuclear-capable Iskander-M short-range ballistic missiles.¹³

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://raskin.house.gov/media/press-releases/raski-urges-us-aid-administrator-green-continue-funding-landmine-removal-artsakh>

⁵ <https://www.evnreport.com/spotlight-karabakh/the-halo-trust-artsakh-s-guardian-angels>

⁶ <https://www.halostrust.org/media/7264/the-halo-trust-accounts-31-march-2020.pdf>

⁷ http://www.mineactionreview.org/assets/downloads/907_NPA_-_Clearing_the_Mines_2020_Nagorno-Karabakh.pdf

⁸ <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2019/azerbaijan/view-all.aspx#2ftn4>

⁹ http://www.mineactionreview.org/assets/downloads/903_NPA_Cluster_Munition_Remnants_2020_Nagorno-Karabakh.pdf

¹⁰ <https://reliefweb.int/report/armenia/icbl-gravely-concerned-about-use-antipersonnel-mines-nagorno-karabakh>

¹¹ http://www.mineactionreview.org/assets/downloads/903_NPA_Cluster_Munition_Remnants_2020_Nagorno-Karabakh.pdf

¹² <https://eurasianet.org/following-war-armenia-and-azerbaijan-reckon-with-unexploded-ordnance>

¹³ <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/contrary-to-previous-claims-evidence-shows-iskander-missiles-in-the-second-nagorno-karabakh-war/>



Unexploded cluster munition rocket in Nagorno-Karabakh capital of Stepanakert/Khankendi on October 6, 2020.
Source: middleeasteye.net

While war continues to re-contaminate land, the resources Halo Trust employs remain small. Halo Trust received its greatest amount of funding in 2008, when it received a combined \$3,242,637 from USAID, the United Kingdom, and private donors.¹⁴ And the half of that funding provided by USAID was restricted to operations solely within the Soviet-era frontiers of Nagorno-Karabakh, while private donors generally restricted their money for mine-clearance, as opposed to operations focusing on CMR and other UXO.¹⁵

The funding has continued to decline, with Halo Trust receiving a total of \$940,000 from the United States in 2012, and then winning grants from USAID in 2013 for a total of \$10,444,223 for fiscal years 2013–2020 or about \$1.49 million per year.^{16,17} And while the authorities in control of Nagorno-Karabakh allow Halo Trust to operate in the region, they do not provide any funding, assist with surveying or providing information, and do not allow Halo Trust access to areas where military forces are deployed.

¹⁴ <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2011/nagorno-karabakh/support-for-mine-action.aspx>

¹⁵ <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2020/nagorno-karabakh/impact.aspx>

¹⁶ <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2020/nagorno-karabakh/support-for-mine-action.aspx>

¹⁷ <https://foreignassistance.gov/explore>

This funding was jeopardized in 2019 when the Trump Administration, citing the lack of civilian casualties in the region since 2017, sought to cease funding Halo Trust's Nagorno-Karabakh operations. The U.S. State Department's decision was reversed only after strenuous action by Congress and the Armenian lobby, with the State Department awarding Halo Trust \$1.4 million for Nagorno-Karabakh operations.¹⁸ This will not be enough. To clear a single site, such as the exploded ammunition dump in Stepanakert/Khankendi, EVN Report's Nick Smart – the organization's director for Europe – said that it would cost \$2.6 million over a two-year period.¹⁹

Over the past years, Halo Trust's local staff has also reduced; prior to the November 10 ceasefire ending the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Halo Trust had a team of 130, down from 153 in 2017.²⁰ Beyond Nagorno-Karabakh and the occupied territories, this team was part of Halo Trust's general South Caucasus operations. And while they focused on mine removal and safety, COVID-19 has also strained Halo's capacity. As one of two international aid organizations in Nagorno-Karabakh (the other being the International Committee of the Red Cross), Halo Trust has found itself providing aid for COVID-19. The NGO has expanded operations from focusing on land clearance to providing pandemic assistance, distributing PPE and hygiene kits to isolated mountain villages. Halo Trust has also modified its fleet of 30 4x4 ambulances traditionally used to assist victims of mines and UXO with partitions to assist COVID-19 positive residents of Nagorno-Karabakh.²¹



Halo Trust Workers with supplies in Nagorno Karabakh. Source: halotrust.org

¹⁸ <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2020/nagorno-karabakh/impact.aspx>

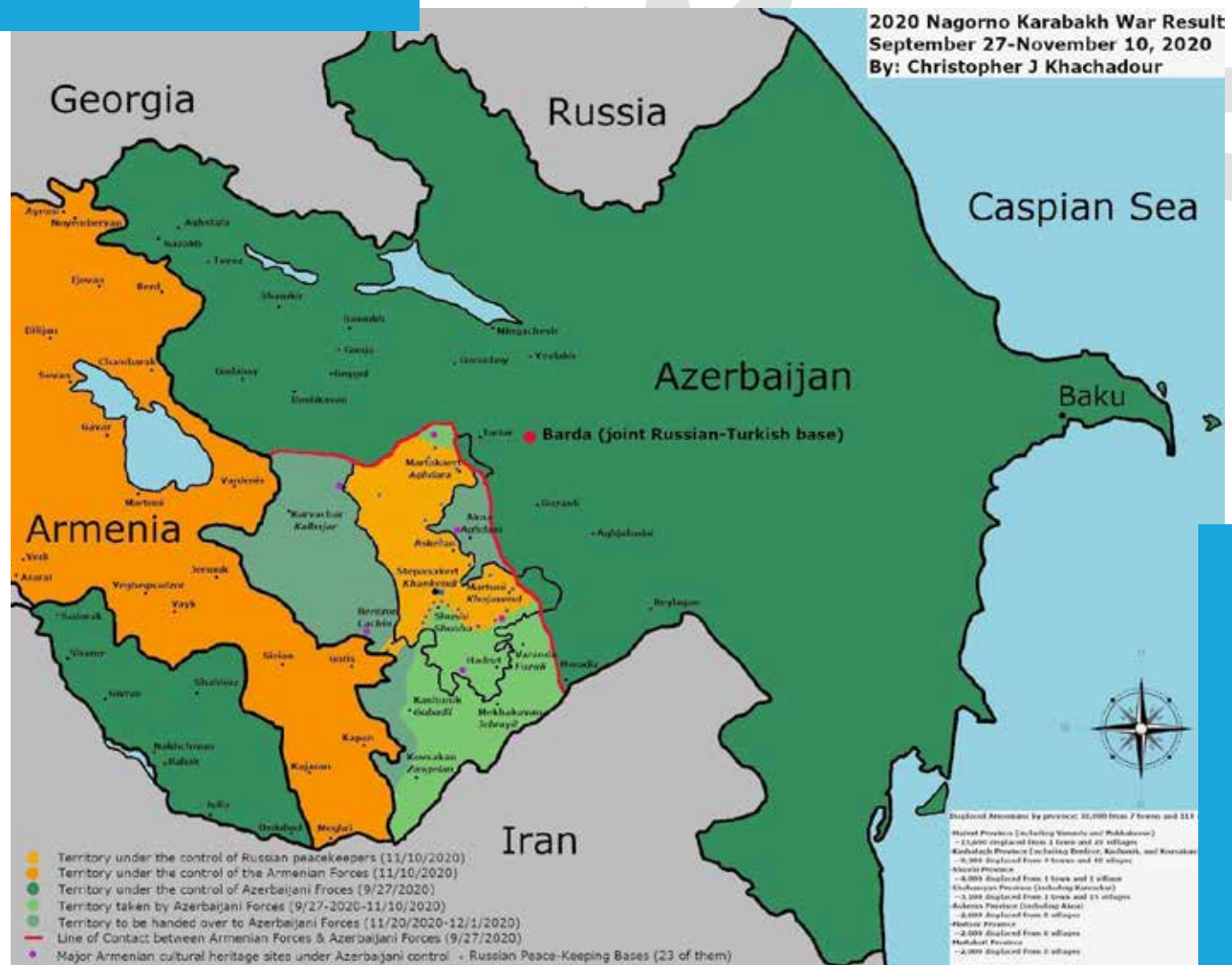
¹⁹ <https://eurasianet.org/following-war-armenia-and-azerbaijan-reckon-with-unexploded-ordnance>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ <https://www.halotrust.org/latest/halo-updates/stories/nagorno-karabakh-covid-19-emergency-response/>

The 2020 War

Map displaying results of 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the results of the November 10, 2020 ceasefire.



Source: Lawfareblog.com

Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 war has presented Halo Trust with additional challenges. On November 10, Russian President Vladimir Putin mediated a so-far successful ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan that saw an end to the hostilities. Among the conditions was the return of the Armenian-occupied districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, as well as the formalization of Azerbaijan's gains in Nagorno-Karabakh proper (including control over the strategic city of Shusha that overlooks the Nagorno-Karabakh capital of Stepanakert/Khankendi). Russia has also deployed a 2,000 strong peacekeeping force, patrolling the strategic Lachin corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.²²

²² <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-nagorno-karabakh-cease-fire-wont-end-conflict>

While the United States, through USAID, provided Halo Trust with funding to operate within Nagorno-Karabakh proper, it did not provide funding for any action beyond the Soviet-era borders of Nagorno-Karabakh. In order to address the issues facing civilians in the Armenian-occupied territories beyond Nagorno-Karabakh, Halo Trust was forced to rely on outside funding, largely from private donors. According to Halo Trust's 2020 financial statements, private donations for operations in Nagorno-Karabakh and the occupied territories amounted to \$999,669 – up from \$120,498 in 2019.²³ These donations, however, came with restrictions that usually focused on mine clearance operations rather than CMR and UXO clearance.

Now that Azerbaijan has regained control over much of its lost territory, Halo Trust's operational jurisdiction is now limited to Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh. Meanwhile, as Azerbaijan reestablishes control over the territories it has regained in the wake of the November 10 ceasefire, Baku must now deal with the effects of the CMR and UXO scattered throughout the territory.

In response, Azerbaijan has determined to scale up its own mine action agency, ANAMA, from under 500 to between 12,000–15,000.²⁴ Turkey, Azerbaijan's main partner during the conflict, dispatched a sapper contingent consisting of 136 soldiers from its Special Mine Detection and Clearance Team to assist in training and operations on December 16, 2020.²⁵ Previously forced to sweep minefields by hand, ANAMA has acquired Turkish-made MEMATT and British-made AARDVARK minesweepers.^{26,27} The United Nations Development Program will also support ANAMA with \$1,000,000 to train, support, and equip ANAMA demining teams.²⁸

Maps displaying operating area of Halo Trust before and after the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani War. Area in yellow represents Halo Trust operating area.



Source: Halo Trust

²³ <https://www.halostrust.org/media/7475/halo-usa-financial-statements-march-2020.pdf>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkish-military-experts-begin-clearing-mines-in-nagorno-karabakh>

²⁶ <https://militaryleak.com/2021/02/08/azerbaijan-receives-turkeys-mematt-mechanical-mine-clearing-equipment-minesweepers/>

²⁷ <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/armenias-refusal-to-share-landmines-maps-hampers-demining-of-azerbajians-karabakh-region-2021-4-7-0/>

²⁸ <https://reliefweb.int/report/azerbaijan/anama-and-undp-join-forces-support-mine-action-azerbaijan>

And following the death of one of its peacekeepers, Russia has begun to clear mines as well.²⁹ According to Russian sources, between November 23, 2020 and April 7, 2021, Russian peacekeepers had cleared 1,912 hectares of land, including 365 miles of road, with over 25,000 explosive objects located and destroyed.³⁰

Even with this assistance, ANAMA is working in a daunting situation. According to some sources, Armenia has spent \$350 million on minefields in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.³¹ Causing further trouble is that, while Armenian troops laid mines in standardized patterns, ethnic Armenian militia forces laid mines haphazardly making it harder to locate them.³² Armenia has also refused to share maps of the region's minefields with Azerbaijan, making the demining process increasingly laborious and dangerous.³³ Because of these factors, ANAMA officials believe clearance operations in the newly recovered territories could take well upwards of a decade, although Azerbaijan's government believes people can safely return to their homes in five years.³⁴

For its part, Halo Trust has grown its staff from its original 130 personnel to 155, with the goal of reaching 250 to meet the challenges caused by new and preexisting landmine, CMR, and UXO land contamination.³⁵ From the ceasefire inked on November 10, 2020 through March, 2021, Halo Trust staff have responded to over 130 calls and destroyed more than 1,800 UXO and more than 18,000 bullets.³⁶ And since the end of the recent conflict, Halo Trust staff find between five and ten UXO per day, having to carefully move it through uneven terrain to offsite demolition zones.³⁷

Challenges for Halo mount. If it is to continue operations in the newly restored territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh, it will need to secure permission from Azerbaijan. The prospects of receiving permission for this are low. Azerbaijani forces have prevented Halo Trust from removing the mines at the Azerbaijani-Georgian border area of Red Bridge by the Georgian village of Kachagani.³⁸ Further, it is likely that Azerbaijan will want to prioritize ANAMA as the major organization to remove the mines in Azerbaijani territory.

In what remains of Armenian-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh, UXO contamination has become the pressing concern. Miles Hawthorn, Halo Trust's program manager of Nagorno-Karabakh, has said that the UXO land contamination caused by both sides' use of cluster munitions during the 2020 war is a major threat. Halo Trust recently finished mapping the major cities in their jurisdiction, and the results are grim. Twenty percent of Stepanakert/Khankendi has been found to have some contamination of UXO. It is a similar figure for the eastern city of Martuni/Khojavend. And in the northern city of Martakert/Aghdara, over one-third of the city is contaminated with UXO. Meanwhile, mapping of 100 villages has revealed two-thirds reporting new UXO.³⁹

²⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/moscow-azerbaijan-armenia-europe-russia-7865aab2ea66886936b898062b93be80>

³⁰ http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12353119@egNews

³¹ <https://menafn.com/1101686724/Israeli-expert-Armenia-spent-350-million-to-mine-Azerbaijani-territories>

³² <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgqwk8/nagorno-karabakh-cluster-munitions-halo-trust>

³³ <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/armenias-refusal-to-share-landmines-maps-hampers-demining-of-azerbajians-karabakh-region-2021-4-7-0/>

³⁴ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/azerbaijan-clearing-mines-in-areas-newly-liberated-from-armenian-occupation/news>

³⁵ <https://www.globalgiving.org/donate/7246/the-halo-trust/reports/>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgqwk8/nagorno-karabakh-cluster-munitions-halo-trust>

³⁸ <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-georgia-border-dispute-a-political-and-literal-minefield>

³⁹ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgqwk8/nagorno-karabakh-cluster-munitions-halo-trust>

Beyond the challenges facing Halo Trust in operating in Azerbaijan, its operations could face serious obstruction by the Russian peacekeepers. Russia has a known antipathy towards any NGO not under the direction of the Kremlin, and towards Western NGOs especially.⁴⁰ Halo Trust in particular does not have the best track record with Russia; in 2000, Moscow accused the NGO of assisting Chechen rebels.⁴¹

For now, Russian peacekeepers have not obstructed Halo Trust's activities in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, soon after the arrival of the Russian peacekeepers to the territory, Halo Trust faced claims of espionage, this time from the de facto authorities of Nagorno-Karabakh. Boris Avagyan, a former deputy chief of Nagorno-Karabakh's State Emergencies Service, accused Halo Trust in March of handing over maps of mine fields in Nagorno-Karabakh to the Turkish government, enabling Azerbaijan's victory.⁴² Mr. Avagyan was fired on April 19, reportedly for blaming the Armenian government for failing to secure the release of Armenian prisoners held in Azerbaijan.⁴³

This accusation came as opposition media recirculated fake news claiming that Halo Trust trained Chechen militants. Halo Trust denied this accusation, and a spokesman for the territory's de facto president said that Mr. Avagyan spoke for himself, noting Halo Trust's long record in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴⁴ Still, the de facto government's National Security Service has opened an investigation against Halo Trust to discover whether they did hand over the maps.⁴⁵ Around the same time, Marianne Clark-Hattingh, the head of UNICEF's office in Armenia, was accused of spying on Armenia for the UK and Azerbaijan. She left the country as Armenia's Foreign Ministry confirmed it had suspended her tenure.⁴⁶

Recent Developments

Despite a cessation of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the extensive mining of Nagorno-Karabakh remains an impediment for establishing lasting peace and for the reconstruction and development of the region. As a result of mines and unexploded ordinance, 22 Azerbaijani citizens, including 14 civilians, have been killed since the signing of the trilateral ceasefire agreement in November 2020, and an additional 87 individuals, including 16 civilians, have been seriously injured. Most recently, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense reported that four citizens, including two journalists, had been killed in an incident in Kalbajar, territory which had been returned to Azerbaijan last year.⁴⁷

As of June 2021, the Armenian government has failed to provide accurate maps to the Azerbaijani government showing regions where Armenian forces planted landmines. Colonel Koryun Gumashyan of Armenia recently issued a warning to Russia and Azerbaijan indicating that he is the only person in possession of maps showing the locations of landmines across a 500–600-hectare area (1.9–2.3 square mile) area in Kalbajar. According to Gumashyan, mining this area of land required 17 truckloads of ordinance.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/18/delegitimization-and-division-in-russia-pub-69958>

⁴¹ <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/world/europe/081100russia-chechnya.html>

⁴² <https://jam-news.net/karabakh-official-accuses-halo-trust-of-spying-for-turkey/>

⁴³ <https://mirrorspectator.com/2021/04/20/karabakh-official-fired-after-criticizing-armenian-authorities/>

⁴⁴ <https://eurasianet.org/in-post-war-armenia-spy-mania-running-amok>

⁴⁵ <https://gagrule.net/artsakh-nss-to-examine-reports-about-halo-trust-handing-minefield-maps-to-turkish-forces/>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ <https://jam-news.net/four-people-including-two-journalists-killed-in-mine-explosion-in-azerbaijan/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/179878.html>

On June 12, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense announced that Armenia and Azerbaijan had reached a deal in which the countries would exchange maps of the locations of landmines in Aghdam and its surrounding regions for 15 Armenian detainees. The maps of the Aghdam region contain information about the location of 97,000 anti-tank and anti-personnel mines.⁴⁹ The 15 Armenian prisoners have been returned to Armenia with the assistance of Georgia.⁵⁰ The issue of mining is one of the most important issues in Azerbaijani domestic politics, and the return of prisoners is a priority for Armenia. Looking forward, Armenia and Azerbaijan should continue to negotiate to secure the return of additional prisoners as well as accurate maps of mine locations. Armenia previously claimed that maps of landmines did not exist, but as demonstrated with these negotiations, they are, in fact, available.⁵¹

Next Steps

Halo Trust has made significant contributions, especially in light of the challenges they have faced. Halo Trust makes efforts to clear as many mines, CMR, and UXO as possible, but its operational capacity is limited. While it was able to clear rural and agricultural areas, it cannot go to zones occupied by Armenian armed forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. When it receives private donations, it is primarily for mines and not more prevalent CMR. Meanwhile, Armenian forces have remined the region, and both Armenian and Azerbaijani forces have dropped cluster munitions that now contaminate at least 44 square miles of Nagorno-Karabakh. ANAMA and the Russian peacekeepers will likely encounter the same frustrations as Halo Trust as they attempt to clear this war-torn land of mines, CMR, and UXO.

While the ultimate solution to the landmine issue in Nagorno-Karabakh is a permanent resolution to the conflict, there are a number of possible steps that can substantially ameliorate the present situation. The authorities of the de-facto regime controlling Nagorno-Karabakh should contribute to and assist Halo Trust in determining contaminated territory and coordinating measures to make the land safe. The United States should also leverage its position as a co-chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group to encourage a joint Armenian-Azerbaijani commission on regional demining, with Georgia and the Minsk co-chairs as observers to this mission.



Halo Trust employee working in Nagorno-Karabakh. Source: Eurasianet.org – Halo Trust

⁴⁹ <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/7396/view>

⁵⁰ <https://civil.ge/archives/427221>

⁵¹ <https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-demands-mine-maps-from-armenia>

As part of this framework, Yerevan would provide a complete record of land survey data in Nagorno-Karabakh and the formerly occupied territories to all parties. Additionally, Baku should allow Halo Trust to work in Azerbaijan; this cooperation would include Halo distributing educational materials on mine safety to civilians, assisting in land survey and demining education to Azerbaijani sapper teams, and identifying high priority contaminated land.

The United States also needs to take a stronger position in the South Caucasus. The Russian-negotiated November 10 ceasefire boosted Russia's military presence in the South Caucasus with its peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the Turkish presence in this peacekeeping mission has prevented Russia from shutting out other powers like the United States. To strengthen its position in the South Caucasus, the United States should not only provide funding to ANAMA, but also deploy sapper teams to train ANAMA teams and assist in demining operations. Beyond the benefits of strengthening the United States' tenuous position in the South Caucasus, this support of Turkish objectives could become a steppingstone towards rewarming U.S.-Turkish relations.

The humanitarian cost of the war, as in all wars, was great; the aftereffects caused by the landmines and unexploded ordinance will be felt for years. While the war caused tragedy, it has also provided the opportunity for new talks on cooperation and reconciliation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Prior to the war, Azerbaijan could show little flexibility as Armenia held 20 percent of its territory. Now having recovered the provinces surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and the historic and strategic city of Shusha, Azerbaijan can begin to consider more diplomatic options. The landmine crisis, an issue that effects Armenia and Azerbaijan, has the potential to provide a forum of cooperation between the sides.

But until a lasting peace is established, demining groups will continue fighting a Sisyphean battle against landmines in Nagorno-Karabakh.