

A Mine-Free South-Eastern Europe: Mission Possible

From 7-9 October 2009, members of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) gathered in Tirana, Albania for the *Tirana Workshop on Achieving a Mine-Free South-Eastern Europe*, to conduct advocacy and outreach in support of the Mine Ban Treaty as well as the Convention on Cluster Munitions. This was the last of a series of regional meetings convened in the lead-up to the Cartagena Summit (Second Review Conference of the Mine Ban Treaty) which will take place in Colombia, from 29 November - 4 December 2009.

Government representatives from 17 countries attended the workshop, including 8 countries from the region (the region was defined for the purposes of this workshop to include the Balkan states plus Greece, Turkey, and the countries of the Southern Caucasus). Representatives attended from Albania, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Colombia, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Italy, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Slovenia, and the United States, plus a representative from the Kosovo Mine Action Centre. In addition, the following international and non-governmental organizations were present: the Albanian Red Cross and several Albanian non-governmental organizations, the European Commission (EC), the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and several of its member organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the ICRC Special Fund for the Disabled, the International Trust Fund (ITF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The **ICBL delegation** to Tirana was comprised of campaigners and victim assistance experts from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Greece, Serbia, and Kosovo, including a group of ban advocates. ICBL member DanChurchAid, who has been the sole mine action operator in Albania in recent years, also actively participated in the meeting. Prior to the workshop, the ICBL held a campaign coordination meeting to prepare for lobbying in the following days and in the lead-up to Cartagena.

On 7 October, workshop participants visited Kukes (the mine-affected region in northern Albania) to see the new prosthetics workshop and rehabilitation center at the Kukes Hospital, which were already being put to good use by survivors and others with disabilities in the region. Short presentations gave participants the opportunity to learn more about mine clearance and victim assistance in the region.

Albania's Deputy Minister of Defense Petrit Karabina opened the conference on 7 October by announcing that "a week ago, the last known mined area was cleared of antipersonnel mines," and that Albania had therefore completed its obligations under Article 5. DanChurchAid, however, was still clearing 6 areas (4 mined areas and 2 cluster munition strike areas) at the time. Clearance of all mined areas and cluster contaminated areas should be finished by the Cartagena Summit. Albanian mine survivor Izet Ademaj took the floor on behalf of the ICBL at the opening, speaking of his own experience and the work he now does with the Albanian NGO Alb-Aid to provide economic and social support to fellow mine survivors in the Kukes region.

The Albanian Mine Action Executive (AMAE) gave a more detailed presentation on clearance in Albania in the next session, stating that 15,250,000 m² had been cleared since 1999, with 76,000 m² left to check and clear (mainly cluster strike areas). AMAE reports 238 people injured and 34 people killed in 210 accidents since 1999, with no more accidents since June 2005. DanChurchAid presented their contribution to mine clearance in Albania, with 12,317,654 km² cleared as of 30 September. They also described plans for post-clearance surveys, to see how the land is being used, to validate the original prioritizing system, to evaluate end users' confidence in the clearance work, and to give feedback to donors on the impact of funding.

The **ITF** gave a presentation on its role in supporting demining in the region, noting that by August 2009 it had raised \$293 million and contributed to the clearance of 99.96 km². Lessons learned by ITF and others in the region included the need for clear, realistic plans with annual targets met (instead of shifting every year), a clear end point, and good reporting. The ITF stated that Serbia was also set to finish clearance by the end of the year, with 4 areas left to clear on the border with Croatia.

In a separate presentation, the ITF noted the contribution of mine action in the region to trade, development, but also to regional cooperation and confidence-building between states (for example by helping with cross-border clearance and border delineation). With clearance almost complete in all but Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia in Southeast Europe, the ITF is now looking to expand its work elsewhere, beginning with workshops in Central Asia.

Bosnia and Herzegovina reported that since the 9th Meeting of the States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty (November 2008), it had released 63.3 km², through clearance, technical and general survey, out of a goal of 115 km². They reported that they are still hoping for meeting 80% of this target in the remaining months and taking into account lags in reporting. There was a 12 million euro shortfall in 2009. Bosnia has a draft 10-year strategy that envisages being free of mines by 2019. The strategy, which includes a sub-strategy on victim assistance, is awaiting approval by the Council of Ministers. A new demining law is also pending approval - the hope is that it will facilitate access to state funding for demining. Bosnia is also working on finalizing a database on landmine survivors. Croatia gave only a general presentation on their mine action program. Dijana Plestina from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented the new center for rehabilitation and education (MARE) in Croatia, which should be open in March 2010.

The **EC** gave a presentation on its funding to mine action in the region, which was followed by a short discussion on integrating mine action into development. Albania and Geneva Call pointed out the need to seek creative categories to fit in mine action work after the elimination of the mine action budget line (Albania had to integrate mine action into its border management strategy to qualify for EC funding.) Canada pointed to the challenge of measuring what is actually being given to mine action now that it is being channeled (at least in their case) through development budgets.

Azerbaijan was the only state not party actively participating in the meeting, though a **U.S.** military advisor from the embassy was present for a short period of time, and there was also a representative of the **Kosovo Mine Action Center**. The representative from Azerbaijan, the mine risk education manager at the Azerbaijan National Authority for Mine Action, asked many questions about the Mine Ban Treaty, including how they would be expected to deal with clearance under the treaty in an area they did not have control over.

There was a one day **parallel program on victim assistance**, which gathered representatives of the governments from the region, rehabilitation centers, the ICRC, ICBL, non-governmental service providers, and other victim assistance experts, including several landmine survivors. The aim was to discuss and examine the progress made and main challenges remaining in the region, as well as the way forward to overcome them and more effectively address the needs of landmine survivors in the region.

The **President-Designate** of the Review Conference spoke at the first session, briefing participants on the preparations for the Cartagena Summit and the need for both government and NGOs/organizations of persons with disabilities, to work together to create a SMART Action Plan to be implemented after the Cartagena Summit. She also called on the government representatives for more national ownership of victim assistance programs. Although the level of victim assistance and services in the region varies, participants agreed that the biggest needs and challenges concern psychological support and socio-economic inclusion, which are still insufficient in most of the countries from the region. Practitioners underlined that peer support, along with more general psychosocial support, have proven to be very effective tools that also promote a human rights-based approach to disability in general.

ICBL representatives Bardhyl Muhadri of Albania and Zeljko Volas of Bosnia and Herzegovina shared during the parallel program and the plenary their own experience as mine survivors, and made recommendations for improving the rehabilitation and socio-economic inclusion of survivors and other people with disabilities, ending with a call for all governments to join and fully implement the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the Mine Ban Treaty.

Handicap International Belgium (HIB) together with AlbAid held a **launch of the report *Voices from the Ground*** on 8 October at the margins of the workshop. It featured speeches made by Arben Braha, representative of the Albanian Ministry of Defense, Veri Dogjani, representative of the Albanian Mine Action Executive (AMAE), Jonuz Kola, Executive Director of ALB-AID and Loren Persi, HIB Researcher based in Serbia. Around 30 persons, including government delegates, members of NGOs, Ban Advocates and other survivors from the region attended the launch. The report launch generated coverage on national TV and in the Tirana Observer.

Throughout the workshop campaigners engaged with governments to promote also signature and ratification of the **Convention on Cluster Munitions**. At the margins of the workshop, on Friday 9 October, the Cluster Munition Coalition and the Government of Albania hosted a side briefing on the convention. The briefing chaired by the Albanian Mine Action Executive, was well attended and heard presentations from CMC,

Albanian survivor Gazmend Geca and DanChurchAid, which has been completing the clearance of Albania's remaining areas contaminated by cluster munitions.

The ICBL together with Anila Alibali from Albania issued a media advisory and a press statement in two languages (English and Albanian), which secured broad media coverage.