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## The Disposal of Albania's Anti-personnel Mine Stockpiles

Against the background of fifty years of communist rule and the prolonged conflict and instability that has devastated the entire Balkan region, Albania acquired an extensive anti-personnel mine problem. This landmine problem has had a significant and devastating humanitarian toll on the country, rendering large areas of valuable land unusable, affecting transportation and contributing to harsh social and economic conditions. The presence of the landmines also hindered the repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons, a situation which posed particularly serious problems for a country trying to rebuild itself and return to normality.

In recognising the gravity of the problem, the Defence Partnership and Cooperation Directorate of NATO's Defence Planning and Operations Division decided to initiate a programme to help Albania meet the demands and challenges of its ammunition-related problems. The importance of this project cannot be over-stated: not only does it save lives and resources, but it also represents a major step in the military reform of Albania, ultimately bringing the country closer to the Euro-Atlantic community.

"Landmines are among the most insidious weapons commonly used in armed conflict. They are too often used indiscriminately and cause immense suffering, especially among civilians who are protected by universally accepted law from acts of war. What is more, they continue to claim victims for decades after the fighting has stopped".

International Committee of the Red Cross

## → What is an anti-personnel mine?

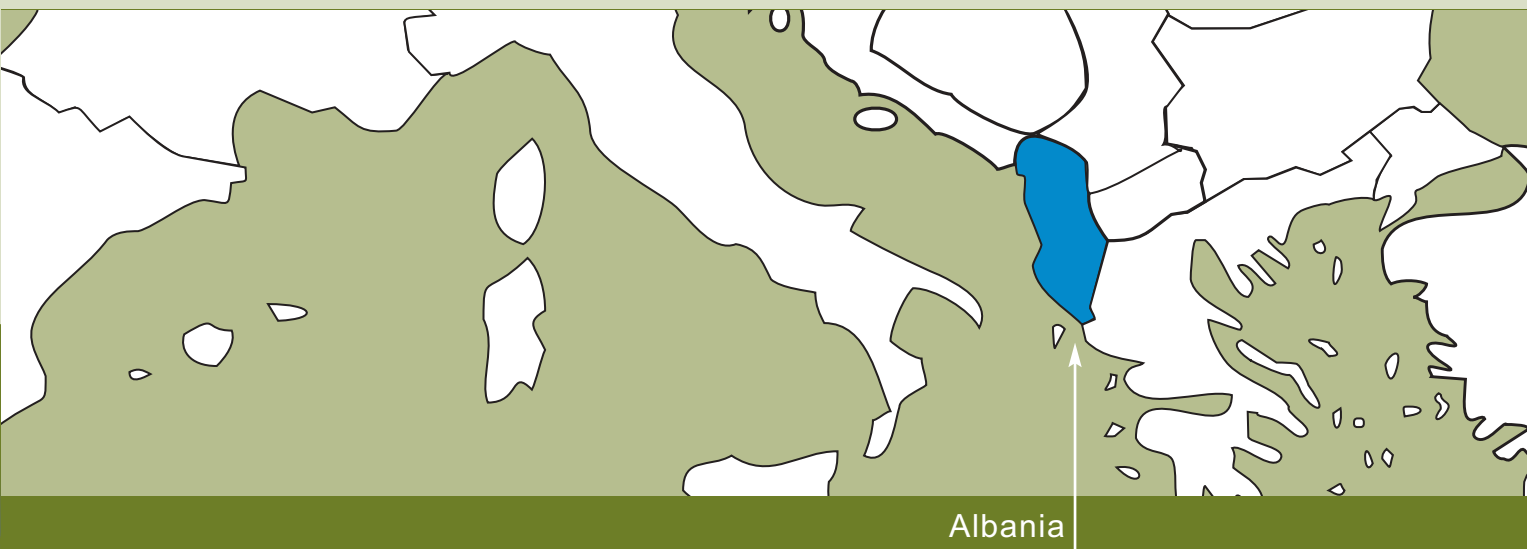


Article 2 of the Ottawa Convention defines an anti-personnel mine as "a mine designed to be exploded by the presence, proximity, or contact of a person and that will incapacitate, injure, or kill one or more persons". Landmines are placed just under the surface of the land and contain between 10 and 250 grammes of explosive charges that, when deployed, cause significant damage and injury to whatever, or whomever, they come in contact with. Anti-personnel mines can be detonated when a person steps on them, picks them up, or disturbs the tripwire attached to them. They cause serious injury, sometimes leading to amputations, life-long disabilities or death. In addition, victims often experience severe psychological trauma. Albania possessed approximately 1 607 420 of these deadly weapons.

## >> Albania's mine problem defined

In 1998 in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (now Serbia and Montenegro), hostilities between Serbian military and police forces and the Kosovar Albanian forces intensified. This was a direct result of the actions of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, who took away the autonomy of the province of Kosovo. The situation continued to deteriorate in 1999 after attempts to reach a political solution proved futile and diplomatic talks failed to end the excessive use of force by the Serbian Army and Special Police. In an attempt to promote stability in the region and to achieve a durable solution to the conflict, NATO launched Operation Allied Force on 23 March 1999.

The conflict situation in Kosovo had direct adverse humanitarian, political and economic consequences for neighbouring countries, including Albania. During Operation Allied Force, many villages and military installations were evacuated along the Kosovo-Albanian border as a result of Serb military incursions, artillery and mortar attacks. Upon their return, civilians and soldiers quickly realised that Albanian territory had become contaminated with anti-personnel mines. In an attempt to deter NATO, Albanian and Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) forces from entering Kosovo, Serb forces had planted an extensive network of anti-personnel mines along the northern border of Albania. A significant number of mines have also been found well into Albanian territory. An area of over 100 kilometres in the vicinity of the border was affected by this problem. Rapid demining of the area was made impossible by the fact that maps detailing the location of the mines do not exist.

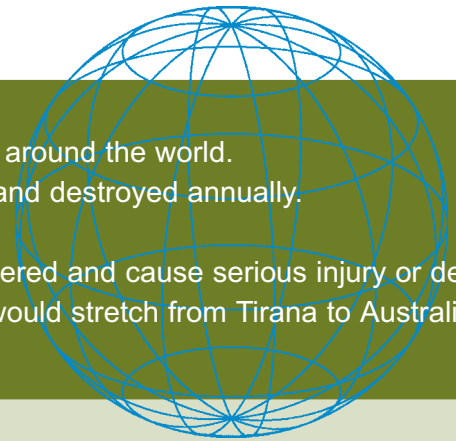


The anti-personnel mine contamination problem represents only one aspect of Albania's munitions problems. In reality, the country has suffered from extensive unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination. During the period of fifty years of communist rule, Albania stockpiled weapons and ammunition in over one hundred different locations throughout the country. Vast quantities of this weaponry and ammunition have become obsolete, posing a threat to nearby populated areas. These dangers became apparent during the violent internal crisis in 1997, when the civil population looted weapons and ammunition depots, causing several major explosions. As a result, a large number of people were injured and 64 were killed.

Lacking sufficient resources of its own, the Albanian armed forces were not equipped to resolve their munitions problems. While many international organisations have contributed significant resources to eradicate mine problems in many countries around the world, most of the aid in the region following the recent conflict was directed to Kosovo.

## Did you know?

- There are over 110 million landmines placed in conflict zones around the world.
- Approximately 100 000 landmines are successfully removed and destroyed annually.
- Between 2 and 5 million landmines are planted annually.
- Anti-personnel mines from World War II continue to be discovered and cause serious injury or death.
- If all the tripwire from Albania's mines were connected, they would stretch from Tirana to Australia and back again.



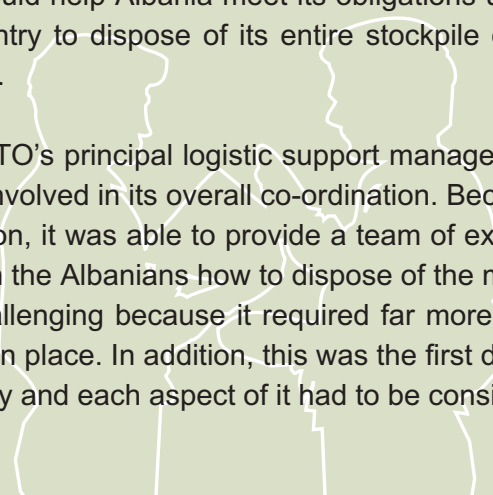
## >> Mission overview

In the aftermath of its internal crisis of 1997, the Albanian Ministry of Defence turned to NATO and its Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme for assistance in rebuilding its armed forces and in dealing with its urgent ammunition-related problems. In 1998, the Albanian government signed an agreement with NATO to develop a special Individual Partnership Programme (IPP) for Albania. The Alliance has since been involved in helping to address the country's specific defence and security needs, including problems of explosive ordnance disposal and ammunition management.

NATO's mission began with a series of Fact Finding Team visits to Albania from August 1997 to July 1998 to evaluate the extent and scope of the munitions problems. It quickly became evident that the unexploded ordnance problem was extensive and would require substantial external assistance to see a positive resolution to the problem.

Under a specially-designed PfP Trust Fund, NATO agreed to provide the financial resources and technological training necessary to help Albania destroy its anti-personnel mine stockpile. The main objective of the project was to help Albania achieve a high-degree of self-sufficiency in explosive ordnance disposal and ammunition management. As such, the project would help Albania meet its obligations under Article 4 of the Ottawa Convention, which requires the country to dispose of its entire stockpile of an estimated 1.6 million anti-personnel mines by February 2004.

The NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency (NAMSA) – NATO's principal logistic support management agency – was the executing agency for the project and was involved in its overall co-ordination. Because NAMSA has extensive experience in munitions demilitarisation, it was able to provide a team of experts who conducted a series of hands-on training courses to teach the Albanians how to dispose of the mines safely and quickly. This project proved to be particularly challenging because it required far more than management – the entire project infrastructure had to be put in place. In addition, this was the first demilitarisation project managed by NAMSA in a non-NATO country and each aspect of it had to be consistent with the relevant safety and environmental standards.



## → What is the Ottawa Convention?

The Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on their Destruction is an international initiative introduced to address the critical landmine problem around the globe. To date, 133 states have signed the Convention and 132 have ratified it. Albania ratified the Convention on 28 February 2000.

# The Disposal of Albania's

The first part of the project involved the establishment of the required processing facilities. Special machines for the demilitarisation of anti-personnel mines had to be designed, manufactured and installed. It was decided that the government-owned munitions factory at Mjekës, previously used for manufacturing explosives, would be the best choice because it already contained some of the necessary facilities. The factory was renovated, existing equipment was restored and new machinery was installed. Once the equipment was in place, local Albanians needed to be trained in proper procedures and safety: the armed forces, tasked with loading and transporting the mines to the factory from their various locations, had to be trained, as did the Albanians working in the factory itself, who needed to be trained in demilitarisation technology and in the techniques of mine disassembly and recycling.



→ Loading and transporting the mines to the process lines at the Mjekës explosives factory was not always routine procedure for the Albanian soldiers. Frequently, the mines were located in remote parts of the country, in mountainous and rocky terrain, and could only be accessed in favourable weather conditions. Others were buried deep in stone encasements and had to be dug out, as pictured here in Lazarate.



→ Albanian soldiers preparing to destroy landmines and unexploded munitions. The anti-personnel mines have already been taken to the Mjekës explosives factory where they were subsequently destroyed.

The NATO PfP Ammunition Management and Ordnance Disposal Training Team (AMODATT) was instrumental in providing the required training to the Albanian armed forces and introducing NATO-standard procedures, methodologies and techniques. This training led to the creation of an Albanian team of qualified UXO experts that have now achieved a significant degree of self-sufficiency in munitions management. NATO and Partner countries contributed further to the efforts by supplying protective gear and demining equipment, enabling the Albanian armed forces to clear over 220 hectares of contaminated land.



# Anti-personnel Mine Stockpiles

The project was sponsored by a lead country, which took charge of coordinating the raising of the necessary funding from several contributing countries. In this case, the lead country was Canada, which was supported by Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. In addition, Hungary contributed funds to help finance independent third party verification of the project and other quality assurance activities required for the project. Independent verification of the work was provided by AMODATT.



→ Once on site, the mines were destroyed by reverse assembly; this job was conducted by locals who had been trained by NATO. Approximately 900 mines were demilitarised each day and the explosives that were extracted were subsequently recycled into ammonite, an explosive used for blasting in civil engineering. The metal mine bodies themselves contain valuable material and were smelted for use in various non-military projects. The whole process was achieved using environmentally-friendly methods. This part of the project directly employed approximately 50 local staff, which was particularly beneficial in an area where unemployment tends to be very high.

Between the time when the project was launched and the beginning of its implementation, only five months were needed. This was a real achievement considering the preparations needed before starting the job. These included listings of details of the stockpile, accurate records of their numbers, condition and location. The project officially started in September 2001 and was completed in April 2002. The Albanian armed forces continue to clear unexploded munitions throughout the country and are currently in the process of seeking international assistance to help with the demining effort near the Kosovo border.



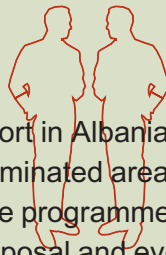
## Did you know?

The fragmented mine bodies, pictured here, were recycled into man-hole covers: welcome news for all drivers.

## >> NATO's PfP: A Programme to enhance stability and security

NATO is continually exploring new ideas to further existing, and create new, practical initiatives designed to enhance cooperation with its Partner countries and to expand the Partnership for Peace Programme, launched in 1994. The PfP Trust Fund for anti-personnel mine disposal, which was established in September 2000, represents a welcome addition and practical tool to assist Partners in their demilitarisation efforts. It is one part of NATO's PfP programme of activities under the Partnership Work Plan (PWP) Chapter of Global Humanitarian Mine Action (GHMA). The aim of the Trust Fund is to help Partner countries dispose of their stockpiled anti-personnel mines. The project proposal for the disposal of Albania's anti-personnel mines was the first under the PfP Trust Fund.

## >> Working together for results



The overarching objective of the ammunition assistance effort in Albania has been to ensure that Albanian armed forces gain the skills and expertise to evaluate contaminated areas when they are found and to conduct the necessary detailed planning for their clearance. The programme has provided Albania with its own NATO-trained specialists to become self-sufficient in the disposal and eventual elimination of its UXO problem. The infrastructure installed at ULP-Mjekës to disassemble Albania's stockpile of mines has also resulted in the establishment of an effective base for the further development of a munitions demilitarisation industry in the country. This will necessarily aid in destroying other excess munitions stockpiles.

The project has been mutually beneficial: NATO provides Albania with the necessary tools to deal with its munitions problems and the project has contributed to enhanced security and stability in the Balkans.

## >> Mission expansion

The successful achievements of the Albania project have led to several positive developments related to expanding the Trust Fund to include new initiatives in Albania, as well as other countries. A PfP Trust Fund for the disposal of excess small arms ammunition in Albania, a project which could have positive regional implications for the Balkans, is currently in its initial planning stages. Albania has also benefited from the Swiss-sponsored PfP project to destroy Albania's stockpile of military chemical toxic material in its entirety. New PfP Trust Funds have also been developed to help other Partner countries dispose of their mines and excess munitions. Moldova and Ukraine are the most recent NATO Partners to benefit from this programme. The possibility exists to expand the Trust Fund even further to include destruction and elimination programmes in countries of the Mediterranean Dialogue, South Eastern Europe Initiative, and the Stability Pact. Priority will continue to be given to signatories of the Ottawa Convention.

## → Who does mine clearance and disposal?

The job of locating, disassembling and destroying landmines is a dangerous and time-consuming one. It requires highly-trained individuals and advanced technical equipment designed specifically for this task. Mines can be detected through a variety of means, including manual search methods such as the use of hand-held prodders and trained dogs, and by various mechanical means.



## One Minute Interview

### >> William Hunt, Project Leader

This demilitarisation project was the first of its kind in a non-NATO member country and has been overwhelmingly successful. In your opinion, what were the most challenging aspects of the project and how were they overcome?

When I think of the many challenges that needed to be overcome for the success of the project, the two most difficult aspects were NATO-related misperceptions and establishing safe working practices.

Although NATO has been actively engaged in the Balkans for several years now, helping to bring about enhanced security and stability, its role and operations are not understood by all members of the local societies. A lack of knowledge, combined with misperceptions and rumours, have resulted in unfavourable attitudes towards NATO presence in some sectors of the population. Additionally, the attitudes and working practices learned from many years of communist rule are not easily shed by the Albanian military and those involved in the military industry. These problems made the process of training the workers and developing the project particularly difficult. As a result, an active public relations campaign was launched which included periodic reports to donors, international organisations and the national press and television, as well as the development of web pages for the Albanian Ministry of Defence website. This campaign has been useful in spreading the word about NATO's involvement in the project and all the positive benefits derived from destroying the country's anti-personnel mine stockpiles.

Secondly, it quickly became apparent during the initial stages of the project that the working practices of the Albanian armed forces and the military industry in the area of anti-personnel mine transportation and destruction were inefficient and, in some instances, unsafe. Because safety was considered paramount, it was necessary to train the Albanian participants in effective management and safe working habits.

While these two challenges were dealt with successfully, I think it will be necessary for the Albanian managers of the Mjekës explosives factory to receive further training and to learn additional capacity-building skills in the event they undertake more complex munitions demilitarisation tasks in the future. However, the NATO-sponsored project has laid a solid foundation that will make it possible for Albania to support other demilitarisation projects in the coming years.

For more information:

- NATO Homepage - [www.nato.int](http://www.nato.int)
- Partnership for Peace - [www.nato.int/pfp/pfp.htm](http://www.nato.int/pfp/pfp.htm)
- NAMSA - [www.namsa.nato.int](http://www.namsa.nato.int)
- NATO Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Ammunition Storage Training Team  
[www.nato.int/structure/DS/www.eodastt/index.htm](http://www.nato.int/structure/DS/www.eodastt/index.htm)