



Demining and the environment – it's not just rats and drones, but they help!

At today's conference on *Confronting the Landmine Challenge: Environmental Implications and Policy Responses*, organised by The Brussels Diplomatic Academy (BDA) of Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), a much needed conversation was started between mine affected countries, demining organisations and donors. The under-reported topic of environmental impacts of landmines, on people and planet, was brought into focus as a light was shone on the realities of living in mine affected countries, the challenges of demining, and the innovative techniques being used to locate and remove a weapon which has been illegal for 25 years.

Innovation is not only found in demining techniques, but also in personnel, such as the creation in Azerbaijan of women only demining teams. As Slobodan Tadic of UNDP Azerbaijan explained, this not only provides women with the opportunity to reclaim land but also to serve as role models for others. Representatives from Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Chad and Colombia explained the specific nature of the threat to their countries by the presence of landmines, unexploded ordnance (UXOs) and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) some of which were laid decades ago, and some of which were laid recently, long after the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban came into force.

According to Vuqar Suleymanov, Chairman of the Board of the Mine Action Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan (ANAMA) *As Azerbaijan assumes the presidency of COP29 this year, we recognize the importance of addressing the environmental impacts of mines within the broader context of global environmental and humanitarian challenges. We are committed to sharing our experiences, learning from others, and working collaboratively to find sustainable solutions.*

The need to share experiences, build partnerships and learn from others were themes raised by many speakers, as was the importance for countries to harness the expertise of NGOs. Anna Bouchier of APOPO – a Belgian organisation which trains rats and dogs to detect landmines – told the conference about the environmental benefits of animal detection. They are cost effective, reduce the need to remove vegetation and speed up land release. Whilst animals can be minimally invasive at ground level, drones, and the interpretation of the data they gather, provide a non-invasive aerial method of mine detection as was explained by Xavier Depreytere, of Odyssey 2025 and Handicap International. He shared examples from Chad, Iraq, Lebanon and Ukraine. Samir Poladov of ANAMA and David Cullen of the European Commission's Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG-NEAR) gave practical examples of how partnerships, shared funding and shared expertise can improve outcomes for mine-affected countries such as Azerbaijan.

At the end of the conference, a small ceremony celebrated the donation of 250,000 Euros by the Belgian government to APOPO to continue their demining work in Aghdam, Azerbaijan. Bouchier stated *APOPO is deeply grateful for the generous support of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs which enables the deployment of its technology further in Azerbaijan. We are proud to be contributing to the land release effort in Terter and Aghdam under the auspices of ANAMA and the Government of Azerbaijan.*

The celebration of this donation, part of Belgium's longstanding mine action work across the world, was a suitable end to the event. A light was briefly turned on the challenges for all of us to clear the world of these devastating, indiscriminate, illegal and toxic weapons. May the light keep shining.

Ends

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