

NAGORNO-KARABAKH

MINE ACTION REVIEW

CLEARING THE MINES 2023

KEY DATA

ANTI-PERSONNEL (AP)
MINE CONTAMINATION: N/K

11,035M²*

(OF NEW CONTAMINATION WAS DISCOVERED IN 2021)

*MINED AREA CONTAINING BOTH ANTI-PERSONNEL MINES AND ANTI-VEHICLE MINES

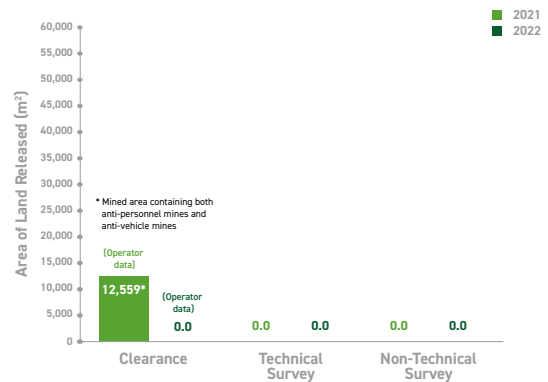
AP MINE
CLEARANCE IN 2022

0M²

AP MINES
DESTROYED IN 2022

1 (DESTROYED AS A SPOT TASK) (OPERATOR DATA)

LAND RELEASE OUTPUT



KEY DEVELOPMENTS

In 2022, there were periodic violations of the 10 November 2020 ceasefire that ended the six-week conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan has accused Armenia of laying thousands of landmines in Nagorno-Karabakh since the end of 2020, claims that Armenia has denied. A blockade in the Lachin corridor, which links Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia and the outside world, started in December 2022 with protests by "eco-activists". In response, The HALO Trust (HALO) limited its area of operation to reduce fuel usage. On 23 April 2023, Azerbaijani forces set up a checkpoint on the Lachin corridor near the border with Armenia, reinforcing the blockade. On 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a 24-hour large-scale military offensive which resulted in it regaining control of the rest of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹ Nagorno-Karabakh is now fully under Azerbaijan's jurisdiction and control. The leader of the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh authorities, Samvel Shahramanyan, signed a decree to dissolve all governmental institutions by 1 January 2024.²

UNDERSTANDING OF AP MINE CONTAMINATION

As a result of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, territory under the control of the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh decreased by about one third³ and most mined areas transferred back to Azerbaijan's control. In 2021, HALO reported the discovery of just one confirmed hazardous area (CHA) of 11,035m²⁴ then under the control of the de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh in Martakert District.⁵

Following the conflict at the end of 2020, HALO's priorities switched from mine survey and clearance to addressing the threat posed by cluster munition remnants (CMR) resulting from the conflict. HALO, the main organisation conducting land release in Nagorno-Karabakh, was not aware of any change to the overall extent of AP mined area in 2022 and did not discover any new mine contamination or release any hazardous area.⁶

1 "Azerbaijan halts Karabakh offensive after ceasefire deal with Armenian separatists", BBC, 21 September 2023, at: <https://bbc.in/3rCVK0e>.

2 "Nagorno-Karabakh's breakaway government says it will dissolve itself", The Guardian, 28 September 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45ozvJ7>.

3 T. de Waal, "Unfinished Business in the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict", Carnegie Europe, 11 February 2021.

4 Email from Miles Hawthorn, Programme Manager, HALO, 5 May 2022.

5 Ibid.

6 Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, Head of Region – Europe (South Caucasus), HALO, 16 March 2023.

Table 1: Mined area in Nagorno-Karabakh not under Azerbaijani control (at end 2022)*⁷

District	CHAs containing AP/AV mines	Area (m ²)
Martakert	1	**11,035
Totals	1	11,035

AV = anti-vehicle

*In September 2023, Azerbaijan regained full control of all remaining areas of Nagorno-Karabakh. **11,035m² refers to new contaminated area discovered in 2021; a total estimate of AP mine contamination is not available given that a significant amount of CHA transferred to Azerbaijani control at the end of 2020, with no baseline assessment completed since then.⁸

Armenia has consistently denied Azerbaijan's contention that it has sent thousands of landmines to Nagorno-Karabakh,⁹ and Azerbaijan's allegations that Armenia has laid new mines in Nagorno-Karabakh¹⁰ have not been independently verified.¹¹ Armenia contends that it has "carried out minelaying exclusively within the sovereign territory of the Republic of Armenia for self-defence purposes only".¹² In addition, Armenia has insisted that the presence of Armenian mines in three districts now under the control of Azerbaijan (Kalbajar, Agdam and Lachin), if established, can be explained by the fact that, at the end the 2020 conflict, a "contact line" continued to exist in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and the Trilateral Statement (signed by Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia on 9 November 2020 and effective from 10 November 2020) did not preclude armed forces from taking steps to secure their positions.¹³

Historically, all regions of Nagorno-Karabakh were affected by mines and unexploded submunitions as a result of the 1988–94 conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and subsequent hostilities. Mines were laid by both the Azeri and pro-Karabakh forces during the war in the 1990s, with a relatively high proportion of anti-vehicle mines (AV mines) being used in some regions.¹⁴ The mines were of Soviet design and manufacture, and due to the nature of the conflict certain areas were mined several times.¹⁵ Nagorno-Karabakh's armed forces said they laid AP mines along the Armenian-Azerbaijani Line of Contact in 2013, both east and north of disputed territory.¹⁶ Unconfirmed reports suggest more mines were laid after the so-called "four-day war" in April 2016. In September 2023, Azerbaijan regained full control of all remaining areas of Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁷

The baseline survey of legacy minefields that restarted in 2022 has been completed in populated areas but was ongoing in uninhabited areas of Nagorno-Karabakh as at March 2023.¹⁸ HALO did not identify any new AP mined area during 2022. However, re-survey may be needed if evidence of new contamination is discovered or new accidents reported. HALO did not conduct any AP mine clearance in 2022, but did identify one degraded AP blast mine in November 2022 in Aygetsan, Askeran district, which was disposed of as an explosive ordnance (EOD) task.¹⁹ In addition, demining detachments from engineering units from the Russian armed forces are reported to have conducted demining in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2022.²⁰

NATIONAL OWNERSHIP AND PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

Nagorno-Karabakh did not have a national mine action centre. Nagorno-Karabakh's security chief, Major-General Vitaly Balasanyan, set up a working group in early 2021 to coordinate clearance of ERW. In 2021 the working group met weekly with participation from the Rescue Service and humanitarian mine clearance organisations, the military, and Russian peacekeepers.²¹

In August 2021, by presidential decree, the group became the "Mine Action Coordination Council" (commonly known as the Mine Action Council), with high-level representation from the authorities, the Centre for Humanitarian Demining (CHD FUND), and HALO.²² This is the only coordination body for mine action in Nagorno-Karabakh. Council meetings continued throughout 2022, with the participation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), but only met once a month. There were no meetings in the first quarter of 2023, but by June 2023, meetings had resumed.²³

7 Emails from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 18 April 2021; and Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

8 Email from David Crawford, Programme Manager, HALO Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia, 19 June 2023.

9 G. Gavin, "Azerbaijan demands UN action as Nagorno-Karabakh landmine row escalates", *Eurasianet*, 12 December 2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3yYS09L>.

10 "Armenia releases map of territories 'seized by Azerbaijan' since 2020", *Open Caucasus Media* (OC Media), 1 February 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3luuq0R>.

11 *Ibid.*; and Gavin, Azerbaijan demands UN action as Nagorno-Karabakh landmine row escalates".

12 International Court of Justice, *Application of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (Azerbaijan v. Armenia), Order, 23 February 2023, at <https://bit.ly/3NwBKEG>, para. 19.

13 *Ibid.*, para. 20.

14 United States Agency for International Development (USAID), "De-mining Needs Assessment in Nagorno-Karabakh", September 2013, p. 2.

15 HALO, "Our role in Nagorno-Karabakh: History", accessed 20 July 2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2Zyu1KZ>.

16 L. Musayelian, "Karabakh Enhances Defense Capabilities", *Asbarez*, Stepanakert, 26 July 2013, at: <https://bit.ly/30I03ew>.

17 "Azerbaijan halts Karabakh offensive after ceasefire deal with Armenian separatists", *BBC*, 21 September 2023.

18 Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Russia CCW Protocol V Article 10 Report (covering 2022), Forms E and F.

21 Emails from Miles Hawthorn, 20 May 2021; and Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

22 Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 6 May 2022.

23 Emails from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023; and David Crawford, HALO, 19 June 2023.

The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities do not provide HALO with funding to clear affected areas.²⁴

In September 2023, Azerbaijan regained full control of all remaining areas of Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁵ The leader of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh authorities, Samvel Shahramanyan, signed a decree to dissolve all governmental institutions by 1 January 2024.²⁶

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES AND ACTION

HALO does not have a programme-level environmental management standard operating procedures (SOPs) for Nagorno-Karabakh but does adhere to its organisational SOP and guidelines set at its headquarters and it complies with local laws.

With a new "Global Environment and Nature Conservation" lead in post at HALO, a local SOP was expected in 2022, but this did not materialise.²⁷ In line with its commitment to protect the environment, when conducting EOD, survey, and clearance, HALO installs latrines, ensures that safe land is not contaminated by explosive kick-outs, removes only vegetation necessary to conduct clearance, and clears all scrap metal and other clearance residues and disposes of them appropriately.²⁸

GENDER AND DIVERSITY

HALO's Nagorno-Karabakh programme reports that it complies strictly with HALO's global gender and diversity policy, providing equal access to employment for women and engaging them in management and operational roles.²⁹ Elements of the policy are integrated into HALO's Nagorno-Karabakh programme SOPs and policies, including non-technical survey (NTS), explosive ordnance risk education (EORE), task management SOPs, and safeguarding and whistleblowing policies. Through private funding, the programme is providing monthly childcare stipends to female employees who have children to support and encourage their engagement in mine action work.³⁰

Overall, 12% (14 women) of HALO staff in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2022 were women. This comprised 10% of supervisory positions (1 woman) and 7% (10 women) working in field

operations.³¹ HALO's most senior national staff member, the Deputy Programme Manager, is a woman.³² HALO's staff include internally displaced persons (IDPs), displaced by the conflict with Azerbaijan in 2020; 19% of programme staff (16 individuals of whom 4 were women) were IDPs at mid-March 2023.³³

All groups affected by CMR and AP mines, including women and children, are said to be consulted during survey and community liaison activities, and HALO prioritises survey and clearance activities in areas where children play and women go to forage.³⁴ Relevant mine action data are disaggregated by age, gender, disability, and by whether individuals are internally displaced, and HALO takes steps to ensure that everyone benefits from clearance.³⁵

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING

Nagorno-Karabakh does not have a mine action information management system. HALO operates its own database.³⁶ In 2020, HALO switched to an online server termed the "Global Operations Information Management System" (GO-IMS). By using GO-IMS and Survey123 (a data collection tool by ArcGIS that applies location-based analytics), HALO continues to strengthen its information management system. In 2022, PowerBI (a platform that infuses visuals into applications) was introduced and rolled out across HALO programmes to improve data visualisation and presentation processes in the organisation.³⁷

²⁴ Email from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 5 May 2022.

²⁵ "Azerbaijan halts Karabakh offensive after ceasefire deal with Armenian separatists", *BBC*, 21 September 2023.

²⁶ "Nagorno-Karabakh's breakaway government says it will dissolve itself", *The Guardian*, 28 September 2023.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; and email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Emails from Asqanaz Hambarzumyan, Field Officer, HALO, 10 April 2019, and Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

³⁰ Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Emails from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 5 May 2022; and David Crawford, HALO, 20 April 2023.

³³ Email from David Crawford, HALO, 20 April 2023.

³⁴ Email from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 5 May 2022.

³⁵ Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

³⁶ Email from Rob Syfret, Programme Manager, HALO, 7 May 2020.

³⁷ Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

There is still no central mechanism or database for systematic sharing of data on mine clearance, underscoring the value of a mine action authority.³⁸ The Mine Action Council (described above) facilitates some sharing of information and data, coordination of activities, and discussion of security and other safety issues. But more detail is required to conform to recognised international standards.³⁹

PLANNING AND TASKING

There is no national mine action strategy in place in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴⁰ Prior to the outbreak of the conflict in September 2020, HALO focused activities on survey and clearance of mined areas in line with donor wishes. Starting in 2019, HALO embarked on a countrywide survey of mine contamination.⁴¹ After the 2020 conflict, HALO put the mine survey on hold and has given priority to survey and clearance of CMR and other unexploded ordnance (UXO) resulting from the war as well as conducting spot-task EOD.⁴²

As indicated, a baseline survey of legacy minefields that started in 2019, suspended after the six-week war in 2020, was restarted in 2022. The baseline survey was ongoing in

unpopulated areas in March 2023.⁴³ Due to the blockade in the Lachin corridor (starting in December 2022 with protests by "eco-activists" and reinforced by the installation of an Azerbaijani checkpoint on the Lachin corridor in April 2023⁴⁴), HALO has limited its area of operation to reduce fuel usage. This has resulted in survey and EOD teams being deployed only in tasks close to Stepanakert.⁴⁵

Generally, HALO selected clearance tasks according to its internal prioritisation matrix based on data collected during survey, including direct and indirect beneficiaries, current and future land use, and accidents data.⁴⁶

LAND RELEASE SYSTEM

STANDARDS AND LAND RELEASE EFFICIENCY

Nagorno-Karabakh has no local mine action standards. HALO follows its internal SOPs developed for the programme in line with HALO's global SOPs and guidelines. This includes SOPs for task management, NTS, manual clearance, mechanical clearance, EOD, medical support and risk education. SOPs are reviewed periodically and updated where new methods or procedures need to be included.⁴⁷

OPERATORS AND OPERATIONAL TOOLS

Since it started working in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2000, HALO had been the main organisation conducting land release. Clearance activities were conducted mostly in the summer months between May and October. In September 2023, Azerbaijan regained full control of the rest of Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴⁸ The leader of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh authorities, Samvel Shahramanyan, signed a decree to dissolve all governmental institutions by 1 January 2024.⁴⁹

Table 2: HALO operational NTS mine and CMR clearance capacities (at January 2022)*⁵⁰

	NTS teams	NTS personnel	Manual Teams	Total deminers
No.	6	18	10	70
Totals	6	18	10	70

* Excluding team leaders, medics, and drivers. HALO did not undertake any AP mine survey or clearance in 2022.

38 Ibid.

39 Email from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 5 May 2022.

40 Email from Asqanaz Hambardzumyan, HALO, 10 April 2019.

41 Email from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 18 April 2021.

42 Email from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 5 May 2022.

43 Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

44 "Azerbaijan sets up checkpoints on the Lachin corridor", *Economic Intelligence*, 27 April 2023, at <https://bit.ly/3WRhSiE>.

45 Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 "Azerbaijan halts Karabakh offensive after ceasefire deal with Armenian separatists", *BBC*, 21 September 2023.

49 "Nagorno-Karabakh's breakaway government says it will dissolve itself", *The Guardian*, 28 September 2023.

50 Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

HALOs overall staff numbers have fluctuated in recent years though there was a steady decrease in personnel in 2021 and 2022. At the beginning of 2022, HALO had a total of 96 field staff (88 survey and clearance personnel including team leaders, plus 8 EOD staff members) but by the end of the year the number had fallen to 64 (including six battle area clearance (BAC) teams and three survey teams).⁵¹ In 2021, HALO had 120 field staff.⁵² The decrease was due to a considerable drop in the value of the US dollar, with staff leaving for better paid positions.⁵³

The Nagorno-Karabakh Emergency Service (formerly known as the Rescue Service) conducts EOD spot tasks and has reportedly conducted some BAC. HALO works very closely with the Emergency Service and has provided many of its staff with EOD and area clearance training.⁵⁴ One Nagorno-Karabakh army unit conducts limited demining.⁵⁵ Russian peacekeepers have conducted area clearance and

spot EOD since the 2020 conflict. The units have not shared details of clearance operations with HALO but do share details with the Emergency Service, and have coordinated with HALO on demolitions.⁵⁶

CHD FUND (previously known as HAK), a local mine clearance organisation, was established in 2020, initially with one clearance team. In 2022, CHD FUND was mostly focused on BAC operations. HALO did not provide any information, equipment, or training to CHD FUND in 2022.⁵⁷

Unlike in 2021, when COVID-19 had a significant impact on survey and clearance operations (vaccine hesitancy in Nagorno-Karabakh, including among HALO staff, was widespread), and a considerable number of team days were lost in both survey and clearance,⁵⁸ COVID-19 did not affect clearance operations in 2022.⁵⁹ A training event in 2022 was cancelled as one participant tested positive for COVID-19.⁶⁰

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS IN 2022

HALO did not conduct survey or clear any AP mined area in 2022.⁶¹ In 2021, it cleared one confirmed mined area, covering 12,559m² containing both AP and AV mines.⁶² This is consistent with HALO's change in priorities in 2021 from AP mine survey and clearance to surveying CMR contamination and clearing ERW, focusing on the destruction of unexploded submunitions.⁶³

Limited information is available on survey or clearance of AP mines by other actors in 2022. Russia reported in its CCW Protocol V Article 10 Report (covering 2022) that engineering units from the Russian armed forces were involved in demining in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁶⁴ No further details were available. In 2021, the Russian Ministry of Defence reported, implausibly, that its peacekeepers had cleared approximately 26km² in Nagorno-Karabakh in the year to November 2021, including farmland. Specialists from its engineering units are reported to have discovered and neutralised more than 26,000 items of explosive ordnance and to have checked 2,000 buildings and social infrastructure, including gas pipelines, communication lines, roads to schools, hospitals, and religious sites. The types of devices destroyed and the locations of clearance were not specified.⁶⁵

51 Email from Sergio Mahecha, Operations Manager, HALO, Nagorno-Karabakh, 3 May 2023.

52 Email from David Crawford, HALO, 20 April 2023.

53 Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

54 Emails from Asqanaz Hambarzumyan, HALO, 26 April 2019; and Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

55 Ibid.

56 Emails from Miles Hawthorn, 18 April 2021; and Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

57 Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

58 Email from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 5 May 2022.

59 Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Email from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 5 May 2022.

63 Email from Miles Hawthorn, HALO, 18 April 2021.

64 Russia Protocol V Article 10 Report (covering 2022), Forms E and F.

65 Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "Russian sappers clear about 2,600 hectares of Nagorno Karabakh territory", 10 November 2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3o14at4>.

SURVEY IN 2022

HALO did not reduce or cancel any mined areas through survey in 2022⁶⁶ or 2021. However, in 2021 HALO did confirm 11,035m² of mined area containing both AP and AV mines, following a tractor accident in January 2021 caused by an AV mine which resulted in the death of the driver.

CLEARANCE IN 2022

As noted above, HALO did not clear any mined area in 2022. HALO did identify and dispose of a degraded AP blast mine in November 2022 in Aygetsan as an EOD task.⁶⁷ In 2021, HALO cleared 12,559m² of mined area in Martakert with the destruction of one AP mine and one AV mine, one item of UXO, and two items of abandoned explosive ordnance (AXO). A further three AP mines and two AV mines were destroyed by HALO during EOD spot tasks in 2021. Russian forces were reported to have undertaken demining in 2022, as they had in 2021, but no details were available.⁶⁸

CMR and AP mine survey and clearance activities in Nagorno-Karabakh was limited by funding constraints. This also prevented HALO from offering competitive salaries, with the consequent loss of staff to organisations offering better salaries.⁶⁹ Until September 2023, the blockade of the Lachin Corridor, which had been in place since mid-December 2022, had been another potential obstacle to survey and clearance of remaining AP mined area. On 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a 24-hour large-scale military offensive which resulted in it regaining control of the rest of Nagorno-Karabakh.⁷⁰ Nagorno-Karabakh is now fully under Azerbaijan's jurisdiction and control. The leader of the *de facto* Nagorno-Karabakh authorities, Samvel Shahramanyan, signed a decree to dissolve all governmental institutions by 1 January 2024.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Email from Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, HALO, 16 March 2023.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Russia Protocol V Article 10 Report (covering 2022), Forms E and F.

⁶⁹ Email from David Crawford, HALO, 20 April 2023.

⁷⁰ "Azerbaijan halts Karabakh offensive after ceasefire deal with Armenian separatists", *BBC*, 21 September 2023, at: <https://bbc.in/3rCVK0e>.

⁷¹ "Nagorno-Karabakh's breakaway government says it will dissolve itself", *The Guardian*, 28 September 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45ozvJ7>.