Belarus misses landmine disposal deadline (BELARUS)

Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka on June 28, 2003 signed Edict No. 330 on the accession of Belarus to the Ottawa mine ban treaty, which took effect for Belarus on March 1, 2004.

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The country was given four years to destroy the world's seventh-largest stock of anti-personnel landmines (APLs). Belarus is not to blame for missing the deadline. The European Union in mid 2006 pledged money for the destruction of PFM-1 (Green Parrot by NATO's classification) mines that contain explosive liquid, but has not yet awarded the contract. Belarus has done what it could. The country has already destroyed its entire stockpile of TNT-containing APLs subject to disposal under the treaty, with financial support totaling €205,000 from Canada and Lithuania. The overall project cost is estimated at €400,000.

Under the NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency's Trust Fund demilitarization project, some of the TNT-containing mines were to be detonated and others were to be converted into other types of ordnance not subject to disposal under the Ottawa convention. The Engineer Troops Office of the Belarusian Armed Forces General Staff reported that 45,425 PMN mines (100 percent of the targeted stock), 114,384 PMN-2 mines (100 percent), and 57,324 POM-2 mines (100 percent) were destroyed throughout 2006. Experts also examined more than 200,826 OZM-72 mines and 5,536 MON mines and converted them to command detonation only. Around 6,000 PPM landmines were left for training soldiers and devising new mine clearance methods. It turned out much more difficult to dispose of some 3.5 million PFM-1 because of environmental risks. The mine is basically a plastic bag containing explosive liquid. PFM-1 was mainly used during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to prevent groups of insurgents from using certain roads. Unfortunately, civilians often fell prey to it. One of the unforeseen results of its military application was a high number of casualties among children. Due to its unusual shape, the mine was often mistaken for a toy by children. As the mine exploded, it often resulted in hand and head trauma, which was frequently lethal. This characteristic made this particular type of land mine a principal target for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

In November 2006, the European Commission invited bids for a €3-million contract to dispose of Belarus' PFM-1 stockpiles, but the winner was not selected because procedural irregularities. In December, the European Commission agreed to raise the contract value to €4 million. The initial bidding competition included Budenerha, a Belarusian company that designed and successfully tested equipment for PFM-1 destruction in 2006. However, the European Commission seems to be willing to award the contract to a company based in the EU. It might have intentionally raised the contract value to encourage EU companies to submit their bids. If Budenerha won the contract, it could have orders for years to come because there are PFM-1 stockpiles in many countries. Belarus' PFM-1 storage period ran out in 1999. Military experts say that in case of poor sealing liquid explosive may leak to the fuse and cause an explosion. Foreign inspectors found, however, that the PFM-1 mines are stored in proper conditions. PFM-1 mines cannot be destroyed by fire because they release a poisonous gas banned by the chemical weapons convention. Unlike German, Swedish Russian and Ukrainian companies, which experimented with destroying the mines by fire or detonation, Budenerha offered a technology to remove the liquid explosive. The company also came up with an environmentally safe method to convert PFM-1 APLs into explosives for industrial demolition. It suggested injecting a special cementing substance in the mine's capsule to prevent leaks and ensure safe storage.

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