



The Environment and Security Initiative: a concurrence of strengths

by David Swalley

Firefighters douse a fire in the advanced course organized by the Antalya Regional Forestry Directorate of Turkey together with the OSCE and the ENVSEC Initiative. (OSCE/David Swalley)

The heat is almost unbearable as a dozen men in yellow reflective clothing rush past me through the pine stands towards the crackling fire and billowing cloud of smoke ahead. The fire-fighters work feverishly with picks and shovels, clearing a five-meter firebreak to halt the advancing blaze. The crew chief barks orders over his short-wave radio to other fire-fighters standing next to fire trucks on the gravel roadway behind me, ready to engage their water pumps should the fire jump over the break. Eventually, the team gains control of the flames and directs them into the fire-break, where they lose their force. The second line of fire-fighters open up their water hoses,

extinguishing the last sparks, everyone relaxes and the less glamorous work of mopping up begins.

The demonstration I have just witnessed is part of an advanced course organized by the Antalya Regional Forestry Directorate of Turkey together with the OSCE and the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) Initiative. The fire-fighters' performance is impressive. But what makes this course truly extraordinary is that it brings together officers from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Georgia and the Russian Federation. Not only are these technical specialists



gaining valuable skills to bring back home, they are also sharing experiences with their colleagues from neighbouring countries.

Confronting environmental threats, which typically know no borders, to build security and confidence among states is exactly what the ENVSEC Initiative is all about. A partnership of international organizations that grew out of discussions after the 2002 OSCE Economic Forum, ENVSEC is dedicated to finding solutions for environmental hazards before they cross national borders and cause political instability. With a budget of approximately €30 million, the ENVSEC Initiative is currently implementing around 45 projects in South-Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe.

Six organizations each bring their own special attributes to the ENVSEC partnership. The OSCE, with its regional security mandate and field missions, lends important political support. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Development Programme contribute environmental expertise and sustainable development approaches. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, holder of five multilateral environmental conventions, provides legal frameworks of co-operation. The Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe leads environmental efforts in its region. Finally, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's Science for Peace and Security Programme, an associate partner, facilitates scientific co-operation.

Getting the different mandates and approaches of these organizations to mesh smoothly is a challenge that is tackled by a central management board, regional desk officers and a Secretariat based at the UNEP Regional Office for Europe in Geneva. Officers work hard to refine communications and co-ordination among the partner organizations and also among participating ENVSEC countries. The Finnish government has recently pledged €6.5 million to further strengthen the ENVSEC Secretariat and implement additional projects throughout the region.

HOW IS AN ENVSEC PROJECT DEVELOPED?

From day one, national ownership has been the driving philosophy of the ENVSEC Initiative. National government ministries, civil society organizations and academics provide ENVSEC partners with a compendium of environment and security issues which they regard as priorities. These perspectives are merged with those of neighbouring states to

produce regional assessment reports, on the basis of which ENVSEC partners develop concrete projects and mobilize political support. In doing so, they work closely with national authorities and civil society organizations.

Since environment and security issues are relevant not only to environmental ministries, ENVSEC has recently begun to encourage the formation of national working groups in which other ministries and civil society organizations are represented as well. These groups help ENVSEC to focus resources and expertise on the problems that are the most urgent for the people on the ground.

OSCE field operations often provide important on-the-spot assistance to the ENVSEC Initiative. Reciprocally, as a recent experience in Armenia has shown, ENVSEC can assist field operations in carrying out their mandates.

OBSOLETE PESTICIDES IN ARMENIA: ACTING QUICKLY TO DIVERT DISASTER

In March of this year, the OSCE Office in Yerevan received an urgent request from the Ministry of Emergency Situations of Armenia to assess the environmental and health risks of a burial site for obsolete pesticides in Nubarashen, half an hour's drive from Yerevan.

The thirty-year-old site dates from a time when the use of organo-chlorine pesticides such as DDT, which are now banned, was widespread. To contain expired chemicals, the Soviet government used to conduct pesticide sweeps, collecting huge amounts into large storage facilities like the one at Nubarashen. According to official records, the Nubarashen site holds over 500 tonnes of at least 31 different types of pesticides.

Residents and NGOs, in particular the Armenian Women for Health and a Healthy Environment, have been worried about the health risk posed by the obsolete chemicals for years. The pesticides are buried on a hillside that is prone to landslides. More than one thousand people live less than one kilometre away, in the villages, Jrashen, Geghanist and Moushakan.

The Office responded to the Ministry's request by contacting ENVSEC via the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna. The OSCE submitted a proposal to the ENVSEC management board and it was unanimously approved. An international expert, John Vijgen, was sent to Armenia to launch a detailed assessment of the situation.

AN UNEXPECTED EMERGENCY

Vijgen arrived in Armenia on April 11 and began preliminary discussions with ministries and NGOs organized by the OSCE Office in Yerevan. But a visit to the storage site brought a shocking surprise.



1 ENVSEC expert John Vijgen and Armenian experts inspect the devastation of the pesticide site in Nuburashen, Armenia, April 2011. (Armenian Women for Health and Healthy Environment/Elena Manvelyan)



2 The Nubarashen pesticide burial site is in a landslide prone area less than a kilometer from inhabited villages. (Armenian Women for Health and Healthy Environment/Elena Manvelyan)

“I knew the site from photos from 2003, and it had been completely devastated,” recounts Vijgen. “Everything was open and pesticides were scattered over the whole area,” he says.

The situation was now not one of long-term risks, but a high emergency. Cattle grazing near the exposed pesticides could die, or their milk could be contaminated. Most importantly, there was an imminent danger that rain, which is especially heavy in the spring, would wash the poison to the villages located downhill from the open landfill.

The OSCE Office in Yerevan reported the finding to the Armenian Government, which made a rapid decision to grant US\$80,000 for short-term emergency measures, while bringing in international organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization to assist in determining long-term remediation measures. It has ordered an investigation into the illegal excavation of the burial site.

Steps are being taken to reclose the site safely. Soil and surface water samples are being taken downstream of the site and the groundwater examined to determine the spread of the contamination. “It will be important to verify if the one and a half metres of clay that, according to the site design held by the Ministry of Agriculture, should be forming the foundation of the site, is really there,” says Vijgen. “This is crucial. If there is no clay layer present, there is a chance that the pesticides will have leached into the surroundings.”

Also under investigation is the amount of

pesticide actually present. “The first impression is that there are more than the originally indicated 500 tonnes of pesticide waste,” says Vijgen.

In addition to determining immediate measures, ENVSEC and the Office in Yerevan are keeping the broader perspective clearly in view. “It is important to use this opportunity to take an inventory of all the pesticide storage sites in Armenia, and determine a way to get rid of the hazard once and for all,” says Ambassador Sergey Kapinos, Head of the Office in Yerevan.

ENVSEC and the OSCE Office in Yerevan are working together closely to secure funding for a feasible long-term solution for the Nubarashen site. This could mean improving the existing facility, neutralizing the pesticides on-site or removing them to be treated elsewhere.

In line with ENVSEC practice, the solution that is eventually chosen will be based on careful consultation with the residents, the experts and the authorities.

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