

SFOPS Member Day Remarks on Nagorno-Karabakh Demining Aid
Rep. Judy Chu
February 27, 2020

Chairwoman Lowey and Ranking Member Rogers. Thank you for the opportunity today to come before this committee today. As the representative of one of America's oldest and largest Armenian communities, I come here today in strong support of providing \$10 million to continue America's successful and life-saving demining program in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Over 30 years ago, as the Soviet Union was collapsing, the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, an overwhelmingly Armenian enclave, were united in the goal of self-determination. But their peaceful movement was followed by violence and government-sponsored pogroms from Azerbaijan. And when the people of Nagorno-Karabakh voted for independence, they were met with war, the consequences of which are still being felt today.

Over the next three years, tens of thousands lost their lives, hundreds of thousands became refugees, and Nagorno-Karabakh became one of the most land-mined areas of the former Soviet Union. These landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) remain today, making it impossible or difficult to settle the land and lay the foundations of a stable state, and killing at least 383 civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh since 1995.

Fortunately, America has the ability and means to safely identify and remove these threats. With the support of USAID, the HALO Trust, a non-political and non-religious organization, has operated in Nagorno-Karabakh since 2000, clearing over 33,000 acres of former minefields. Thanks to HALO, over 3,500 landmines, 3,100 cluster munitions, and 7,600 items of unexploded or abandoned ordnance have been destroyed.

But with at least 1.7 million square meters of contaminated areas still remaining, USAID is trying to end support for this program with little to no justification. For instance, in a recent letter defending the decision to shift focus away from demining, USAID told me there had been "no reported civilian injuries or casualties from mines...since 2017." But there have, in fact, been 10 civilian casualties in that time from landmines, and an additional 2 from cluster munitions. And in just the past 12 months, there have been 12 near misses – like a farmer digging in his field only to glance a mine causing great destruction, but who thankfully survived the blast. Another man was riding his horse when they hit a mine. Fortunately, the man survived, but his horse did not, demonstrating the ongoing threat from these mines.

In that same letter, USAID justified their move away from demining by saying they wanted to shift focus to "preparing populations for peace." But landmines and UXO are literal obstacles to that goal. Landmines exist to prevent peace, and to make it impossible for the populations to settle, use land, and reduce tensions. That is why the US has proudly been the world's single largest supporter of humanitarian demining. This is a commitment we must not back away from, especially since we know there is work left undone.

This request of \$10 million pales in comparison to the \$100 million in security assistance given to Azerbaijan, so we can be sure that financial constraints are not the obstacle here. And it does

not make sense to walk away from a program that USAID acknowledges has been successful while there are still so many acres of land left to clear.

If we are sincere in our commitment to peace, then we must support this request of \$10 million, which will allow HALO to finish their work and remove the landmines and UXO that daily threaten the lives of civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Thank you for your consideration of this important request.