

RASR conference in Durres, 24 April 2012

Speech of the Albania Minister of Defense Mr. Arben Imami

Honorable Mr. Zverzanovski,

Honorable Mrs. / Deputy Chief of Mission of the United States of America,

Honorable participants,

I would like to express my congratulations to the USA State Department and the organizers for making the arrangements for this important event in Albania, to welcome all the representatives from the countries in the region who are present today, as well to wish you successful working sessions during this two days conference.

The issue of excess ammunition is a common regional phenomena, a legacy inherited due to of the situation we have faced during the Cold War, and the very nature of the political systems out of which the countries of our region emerged 20 years ago. The militarization of the communist bloc countries, not only due to of external causes such as the Cold War, but also for internal reasons, namely the establishment of guarantees for the maintenance of the regimes, created large stocks of arms and ammunition, which fortunately were never used. But unlike the Western countries in Southeastern European countries, the military organizational system was such that it made it difficult or impossible for the natural replacement of excess ammunition and obsolete equipment with modern military equipment and armaments. This was due to the structural and the economic situation as well as other reasons.

This became even stronger in Albania due to the isolationist policies of the communist regime, who froze the military technology, equipment and ammunitions received during the good period of relationships with the Soviet Union and then later on with China. After the breakup of these relationships, the domestic production of weapons and ammunition could not satisfy the paranoid ambitions of the regime for new weapons and ammunition so the majority of the remaining stock ammunition is from the Soviet Union and China, within production years in the 60-ies and 70-ies.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War. Our countries joined the Western model of liberal democracies in an entirely different security and international relations framework. The assumed enemy of

the Cold War no longer existed; therefore drastic changes were needed in the security sector, particularly the military one. The 194,000 tons of munitions and explosives, 8000 major armaments, 300,000 light weapons, and thousands of properties, all around the country were under the administration of the Armed Forces. As the Albanian Armed Forces were rapidly restructured and downsized, the burden of storing, maintaining and safeguarding of these arsenals became overwhelming. Some attempts were made to eliminate some of these materials, but the task was too great and too costly.

The overwhelming amount of these inherited stocks of ammunition, weapons and equipment were first of all redundant and secondly obsolete and out of use. In the framework of the major political changes that occurred in the region, the natural hardships of adapting to a new political system regardless of the undisputed unanimity of the population and the political class, the internal instabilities and criminal networks that could have benefited from these situations, the issue of excess ammunition was not only an internal security issue of the countries that possessed these weapons, but it was also a strategically important issue, which could create complications for the security of the region and beyond.

In this context, Albania considered the destruction of surplus munitions and its entire military arsenal as a main priority. Firstly, we identified the most dangerous munitions and explosives, prioritizing their destruction in a safe manner, and then later on the eventual destruction of the entire amount. The process of dismantling and disposal of these ammunitions, besides the technical difficulties and high risk, has also been at great financial cost. Therefore, the demilitarization program has been a really great burden not only in terms of the risk represented, but also economically in terms of the heavy weight in the defense budget.

After the tragic incident of 2008, the final solution of this problem became indispensable. The Albanian government made a clear decision to destroy the entire amount of surplus munitions and explosives by 2013. In September 2009, approximately 85 thousand tons of excess ammunition was still under the management of the AAF. In October 2009, we established the Steering Board for Demilitarization of surplus munitions, chaired by Deputy Minister of Defense, composed with members from the main Directorates of MOD and the Defense General Staff, Directors of Factories, and Logistic Brigade. The working principles that would guide the entire process were defined. They were simple principles which yielded surprising results and outcomes in a short period of time.

The main tasks of the Demilitarization Board were as follows:

Verify the status of ammunitions on the grounds and places where they were stored; Selection of all the ammunition according to the methods which would be used for destruction and identification of the ones which are in good conditions for donation or sale; Reduction of munitions depots which were near the residential areas as well as to improve safety and security in other existing munitions depots. The scrupulous planning of the amounts to be dismantled, identifying and listing munitions as per the method of destruction, and formalization of the entire plan were all scheduled in a strict timeline. Procedures were also established for identification and approval of new demolition ranges to be used for destruction for munitions which could not be disposed in an industrial way, as well as the establishment of new and modern technology in the military facilities aiming to increasing the capacities and efficiency of the industrial demilitarization process. All of those are associated with ongoing monitoring of the implementation of the approved roadmap.

The achieved results are impressive. Before, Albania was able to destroy five to six thousand tons of excess ammunition per year, while in 2010 and 2011 the amount of munitions destroyed is being multiplied by five. Currently, we have capacities to destroy around 20 thousand tons of excess ammunition per year. At present, there is less than 35 thousand tons of excess ammunition remaining, which according to the schedule will be destroyed within the next year. During the first half of 2012 we will finish and complete the destruction of munitions at demolition ranges, which has been more problematic due to the inherent risk and negative effects on the environment. The rest of remaining amount of excess ammunition will be industrially dismantled in our military facilities.

Finally we can say that we see the end point of this process, a moment which will be a great relief for the Armed Forces and the citizens of this country.

In conclusion, on behalf of the Albanian Government and the Ministry of Defense, I would like to express my gratitude for the valuable assistance provided by the United States of America, Germany, Denmark, Finland, OSCE and other international organizations, for pushing forward this vital process. Without their support and assistance these great results would not be achieved.

Thank you and I wish you further successes in this Conference.