

Balakliya Ammunition Depot, Balakliya, Ukraine – 23 Mar 2017

MSIAC
Munitions Safety Information Analysis Center



On the 23rd March 2017, 20,000 inhabitants of Balakliya were evacuated after a series of massive explosions erupted at a nearby arms depot of the Balakliya military installation. The depot reportedly held 128 million kg of ammunition including stockpiles of missiles, tank ammunition and artillery rockets. The explosions were caused after a fire broke out in the facility which quickly spread through the stores of ammunition.

The exact cause of the fire is unknown, however in 2015 a drone attack unsuccessfully attempted to start a fire in the depot. Soldiers guarding the depot reported hearing the sound of an airplane or drone before the March 2017 explosion.

The installation is located approximately 100 km from the fighting in eastern Ukraine, and supplies Ukrainian forces fighting there with ammunition. This factor has led many to blame Russia or pro-Russian operatives for the blast.

In response to the explosion, a 10 km exclusion zone was established around the depot and a 50 km radius no-fly-zone established above it. The scale of the explosion led the Ukrainian government to call on NATO to assist with the clean-up.

The close proximity of the depot to the town of Balakliya added to the complexity of the operation. The explosion damaged fuel stations, and debris from the explosions littered the area around multi-storey apartment blocks, suburban backyards and school playgrounds.

To prevent further damage and loss of life, electricity, gas and water supplies to the town were shut off causing significant disruption and further hampering the clean-up.

According to various estimates, the depot stored 20–30% of the nation's ammunition reserves, including obsolete Soviet-era ammunition. Earlier reports suggested the depot was unsafe long before the incident occurred. Pictures published in social media by base personnel showed massive stores of rusty, out-dated heavy munitions being stored in the open air or in simple tents and the huge depot was guarded by only 90 lightly armed service men.

At a press conference in Kyiv on the 23rd March 2017, the Ukrainian Security Service Chief confirmed that the depot had been repeatedly flagged for problems with safety, stating "In February this year, the head department of military counter-intelligence informed the management of that depot about deficiencies discovered in safety and security standards".

1 Fatality

5 Injuries

Unknown Damages