

The SAFE Zone

Story by
Andrew Stamer

Construction safety is important to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Europe District, because it is safety that gets workers home to their families at the end of the day.

A team from the Europe District traveled to the country of Georgia, in January, to teach a three-day training course on construction safety.

The course, which is new for the district, was designed for construction firms in emerging nations by Europe District's Engineering and Construction Division and Safety Office.

"We realized that some of the emerging nations we do work in have no level of safety standards or training," said David Stanton, occupational health and safety manager, Europe District. "We felt it was incumbent upon us to start the process for them."

The goal is to reduce the rate of injuries and fatalities. As a whole, the Corps averages about 0.58

construction accidents per 100 workers, while construction counterparts in the United States and Central Europe average about 5 accidents per 100, said Stanton.

Safety standards in Central Europe and the United States are similar, but in some nations where the Corps is located, few stress safety, said Stanton.

In Turkey and Georgia, university graduates with engineering degrees receive minimal safety training.

Safety has been a Corps' concern for years, and construction quality assurance representatives have been showing contractors on the job site what is, and isn't, acceptable.

There was never a class held specifically for these contractors, until the summer of 2004.

"After a fatality that we had ... in Turkey, we

realized our contractors had a serious need for construction safety training," said Stanton.

That fatality occurred because the contractor had been using nonstandard equipment, which didn't meet Corps' safety standards, said Ernie Drott, chief of Europe District's Engineering and Construction

Col. Lee Staab (far left), commander, Europe District, talks with Georgian construction representatives during the first day of safety training in Tbilisi, Georgia.



Photo by Andrew Stamer

Division. The scaffolding was put up with the wrong size pulleys and cables; the cables were frayed and there were other problems with the set up. The worker on top fell off because of these safety violations.

This was something that could have been stopped if the contractor had followed the proper safety guidelines put forth by the Corps. That is also why quality assurance representatives from the Europe District participate in these training sessions.

“We’re trying to develop contractors in some of these countries and we’ve noticed that there have been tendencies towards using materials that aren’t up to standard,” said Drott. The Corps of Engineers typically demands higher safety standards than most other agencies in the world.

“We realized we needed to take some extra precautions here and teach the workers about safety,” said Drott.

Training, such as this course, is costly but a good investment.

“The Corps used its own money to put on this safety training for the contractors in Georgia and it will benefit us. It will also benefit the other projects that the Corps is getting involved in that have nothing to do with our program,” said Jon Trumble, chief of party, U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The Corps is working with Customs and Border Protection on projects throughout Georgia for the Georgian border guard and customs service. These projects range from an aircraft hangar renovation to ports on the Black Sea.

But, the priority of this training is to save lives, though it has additional benefits, said

Stanton.

“We have a new motto in Europe District that safety equals quality,” he said. It’s been found that a safe construction site is almost always a quality construction site.

“If a contractor is applying proper safety measures, he’s probably also building a quality product,” said Stanton.

“This will also help these countries because many of them want to join the European Union, and if they want to join the European Union they’re going to have to meet the European Union standards for construction, which are very similar to the Corps,” said Stanton. The Corps is helping develop contractors to make that easier, and building lasting relationships at the same time.

“It’s a proactive approach to emphasize safety in the district,” said Drott.

“This training was part of a safety stand down, a format commonly used in the Army.

“Safety stand downs are sometimes used when you find projects getting out of hand and the safety is going down hill rapidly,” said Stanton. The hope is to reverse the trend. In Georgia this format was used to gather the contractors in a proactive approach to safety; to stop unsafe work before it starts.

The first session, for all workers, consisted of a four-hour basic introduction to the major

safety hazards that are found on all construction sites around the world, which include falls, excavation cave-ins, being struck by something, electrocution and vehicle operations, said Stanton.

“They’re common, no matter where you work you’re going to find the same common hazards because of the nature of construction,” said Stanton.

The next two sessions were a more in-depth safety overview for managers, quality control and safety personnel.

The Europe District hopes to be able to do this training once a year at all of its offices, said Drott.

Stanton has been asked to teach 17 of these classes over a three-week period in Iraq for the Gulf Region Division.

“The same training we’re doing will be deployed to Iraqi workers there,” said Stanton.

While the training is currently being targeted at direct contracts, they hope to be able to provide it to contractors on indirect contracts in the future.

“Every year that I’ve been here, we’ve had a fatality on one of our projects with host nation oversight, and because of that we’re very concerned about being able to influence safety on these jobs,” said Drott.

The training the Europe District provides can help save lives and serious injury, regardless if the job has host nation involvement or not. The district will continue to be a proactive partner, training contractors on proper safety techniques.

