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Responding to an Emergency: An Interview with Bob MacPherson, CARE

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In an interview with The Journal, Bob MacPherson spoke candidly and honestly about the challenges, successes and lessons learned in effectively responding to an emergency situation. MacPherson is responsible for landmine safety and awareness and is the emergency team leader for CARE. Throughout 1999, he has been in Kosovo coordinating activities so that civilian lives can return to a state of normalcy. Upon finishing our conversation, he was scheduled to fly to Chechnya to try to coordinate relief efforts for that war-ravaged country.

Currently, the Kosovo refugee crisis and the current Chechnya war are vying for first place for the worst humanitarian disaster in Europe since World War II. From March 24, 1999, when NATO began bombing Yugoslavia, until June 10, 1999, when a peace agreement was signed between the Yugoslav government and NATO, more than 1 million ethnic Albanian refugees fled the province of Kosovo. The refugees, many of whom were forced from their homes at gunpoint, crossed over into neighboring Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Hundreds of thousands more were internally displaced within Kosovo’s borders.

Building on its existing presence in the Balkans, CARE launched an immediate emergency response, eventually managing eight refugee camps in Albania and Macedonia housing over 100,000 refugees. CARE had been working in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia since 1993 helping displaced Serb refugees from Bosnia, and in Kosovo. Since 1998 they have been implementing shelter provision and repair, agricultural rehabilitation and mine-awareness training and demining. CARE re-entered Kosovo three days after the first NATO troops and is now working in the Urosevac (known as Ferizaj in Albanian), Kacanik, Lipljan and Mitrovica areas. Over 810,000 refugees have returned to Kosovo from neighboring Albania and Macedonia and other countries. More than 20,000 refugees remain in Macedonia and 4,030 refugees remain in Albania.

Standing on a cleared strip of land, a deminer directs his mine dog.

Photo c/o CARE

by Margaret S. Busé

"There is no black magic to mine action, just a large dose of funding and integration."

—Bob MacPherson
Responding to an Emergency

• How long have you been involved with relief efforts in Yugoslavia?

BM: Since 1994 I have spent much of my time going back and forth, first from Bosnia and then I got involved with Kosovo in the first part of November 1999.

• What were your prominent activities in Bosnia?

BM: It was totally emergency relief and shelter. It was interesting how things evolved in Bosnia and how by 1994/1995 there were so few strikies in the NGO community and then there was a whole sale rush into Bosnia with mine action and mine awareness.

• In Kosovo have you done mine awareness and demining?

BM: I am most proud of Kosovo. We do some mine awareness, but predominantly mine action in Kosovo. We use MINE TECH and right now we have four teams and that in essence is eight men and two dogs per team. We work generally a corridor from Mitrovica to the north to Vavria and Unsrouch to the south.

• What did you run into in Kosovo that you had not encountered before?

BM: Easily it was the prevalence of cluster bombs and the sophistication of the NATO weapons. In essence we came in three days after NATO; I had MINE TECH on the ground four days after that. One thing I have a lot of pride in is that in Kosovo we took the lessons that we watched other NGOs and other organizations do and applied them. I call it an integrated process and this is by no means a unique or innovative concept, it is just right. What we did right from the beginning is that we focused on shelter. We focused on agriculture and some health, but in the beginning it was shelter. If you could just draw those three areas in a vertical bar. Underneath of that foundation I put mine action and mine awareness because we saw that in Kosovo there was a large shelter area going into the remote areas of the country that had been beat up very well, having that mine-assessment team right with that shelter-assessment team paid us dividends that were off the page. We also employed an emergency explosive ordnance demolition team. So that is how we worked the immediate problems through an integrated approach. Just by the fact of who you work with, you can show off a lot of times. You can have all the mine-awareness education, but people want to say ‘Thank you very much, we understand the problem but we have a problem right here that we need help with. What can you do for us today-this second?’ This integrated approach has worked real well for us and the communities we are trying to help.

• What type of information could you or your organization have benefited from before you deployed there?

BM: About as much geographic information system (GIS) services as is possible. I really am big on this. If I could have gone to one central repository and said ‘OK, let’s look at this province from a geographic information point of view. Where are locations for industrial capabilities, agricultural capabilities? Where is the predominance of forests? Forests became a big thing to us for wood and shelter, and then to try to determine where the known mine fields were. To put all of this information together would have been a tremendous help. The shame of it is that information is there. It is a matter of us sitting down and for us to have that coordinating mechanism. On a positive side, I have never experienced this before; the U.S. State Department deployed their GIS capability into the field. That was an enormous benefit to us.

• How successful was integrating information with the other NGOs operating in the field?

BM: I have never had a problem. It may be because of the tightness of the community. Organizations that I traditionally work quite well with are the ICRC, NPA and Handicap International. We bump into each other quite a bit and I have an enormous respect for those organizations’ survivor and victim assistance programs, something we don’t do. I go looking for these fellows, HALO, Greenfields, MAGs, the cast of thousands—we all work well together. I may have disagreed with them now and again, but I have never jumped into the competitiveness that some talk about.

• There was quite a media blitz involved in Kosovo. Did that help or hurt you and your organizations?

BM: It is not the case at all. I really don’t think that it costs me an enormous amount of people. The only bad thing is that they just made it emotional, but I believe strongly that there must be a component of each to make mine action successful. The lessons I learned that I have seen with other NGOs is that you can’t do what I call ‘mine initiatives’ which wraps up both mine action and mine awareness. You can’t do them in isolation, in other words they must be part of the entire relief and development and that is the lesson that I have watched. There is no rocket science to that. I heard one time from Gay Willoughby at a conference in Geneva last year. He made a great point. Too many people think that this mine program at least on the mine action side is a bit of black magic. That there is something more to this than precise execution of a formula. We know how is tough to raise money. I get frustrated. There is an integrated capacity to mine action going on with each of CARE’s programs and that is very important when you are as large as CARE is. I am a strong believer in mine awareness, but I think that the NGO community has to be involved from the mine action side.

• In the actual demining?

BM: Yes. The problem I have with the US Department is they just gave a $250 million contract to RONCO over a five-year period. They feel they have worked real well for them on the DoD side and therefore this is a good expenditure for their funds. What they cannot do, which is what we do, is the integrated process of demining, of wrapping the whole process up in relief, transition and development. Because getting money out of the U.S. government is the toughest thing I do. Thank God for the private foreign community and some of the European governments. I am not trying to politicize because that just makes it emotional, but I believe strongly that there must be a component of each to make mine action successful. The lessons I learned that I have seen with other NGOs is that you can’t do what I call ‘mine initiatives’ which wraps up both mine action and mine awareness.
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So, you think it would benefit more NGOs to get involved in the actual demining because right now, most aren’t involved?

BM: This is obviously something that if you’re going to do it, you better do it all the way. So if you are going to commit ... That is the only reservation I have. Sure I would like to see dozens of NGOs out there as long as they are committed professionals and they know what they are doing. Seventy percent of what we do has to be based on the integration within the mine action community and if you want to do this and go it alone you might as well not bother. Look at the results of an unprofessional approach — this is not something that we can fool around with.

Do the NGOs share information well?

BM: The organizations I work with are very professional. If I ask a question of one of them the answer comes back very quickly. I can call my contacts 24 hours a day and I will get an answer.

You have mentioned the mine initiatives and working with an integrated mine action program. Is that the KIMAP (Kosovo Integrated Mine Action Program) that I saw mentioned?

BM: In essence I was writing that on the fly. That goes way back. That was a program that I first put together looking for funding for mine awareness and mine action, which I put to the United Nations. What eventually had to happen was I had to break it down into two separate components and seek funding separately for mine action and mine awareness. Just finished working on today the Kosovo Mine Awareness Project, which is going to the BPMP. What happened in the very beginning, the people who really came to the rescue were the Canadian and British governments for funding mine awareness and mine action. I need funding for the next six months. This program will be submitted to the Bureau of Population and Refugees in Washington for mine awareness.

What type of time frame does it take to get a mine-awareness program off the ground when you have refugees returning?

BM: I will answer that in two ways. In Kosovo it wasn’t as hard because a lot of other NGOs had done mine awareness in the camps in Macedonia and Albania. To do it right it is going to take two or three weeks to get the right guys. It depends if it is a crisis, but to get the right guys in there to set the thing up is the trick. I am thinking about Albania where we had a dead start. We had a man and woman finally come in and that took two weeks and they were skilled at mine education.

Were you the initiative for the integrated approach to mine action?

BM: Yes, and I got funding from Great Britain’s DC. Now thanks to the U.S. Department of State’s Humanitarian Demining unit that lead us to the International Trust Fund. We are in essence getting two for one for the money. The drum I keep hammering is what I have already put forth. I am not going to come to Kosovo and run down this road and start destroying mines and have health, agriculture and shelter going on separately. Sometimes it is just as effective to tell people where the mines are. I am trying to sell this as an integrative process-awareness, mine action, health, agriculture, shelter.

With this integrated approach, who determines the priority of areas to be demined?

BM: If you look at the map of Kosovo the 450 documented mine fields that the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia forces turned over to NATO, we had 200 plus in our area. We worked, as all of us did with UNMAG, to work with the coordination of where we were going to position our assets. We finally got some help from MAG and Greenfield in our area.

What are the successes of CARE’s programs in Kosovo?

BM: Just in the month of September 1999, we cleared 3,068 houses in our area.

What does that mean?

BM: That goes back to the shelter requirement, helping people get out of the cold for winter. It means when we had our shelter coordinators moving through an area before they could even go in a house to begin making their assessment, dogs went through those homes to clear them. We had agricultural sights cleared. Dangerous areas confirmed were 31 villages now that can be one acre or 100. Schools cleared were two. Kilometers of road cleared, 12. Water lines cleared, 54 km. That gives you an idea. This was the first time CARE was on the ground from the beginning. We took some of the lessons learned in other places and from what other NGO’s have told us.

How did you come about being so well prepared this time?

BM: We spent November through March out there. I never thought it would come to bombing, but I watched this war being fought by the KLA and the Federal Republic forces. At that time UNICEF and CARE were going to implement a Kosovo wide mine-awareness program in April, just before the kids got out of school. I was really tuned into the existing problem of UXO before the bombing started and because of my previous experience in Bosnia, I knew that the Serb army was pretty good about documenting landmines but the splinter militias were tough. I spent 25 years as an U.S. Marine officer and I know for planning purposes that 10-15 percent of all munitions that are dropped are planned for malfunctioning. You didn’t have to be too smart to put all those figures together. That is where my preparation came from.

Where do you see the future of CARE’s programs in Kosovo?

BM: CARE will be there for the long run for mine action and mine awareness.

How do you think enough land has been cleared for that?

BM: I don’t think the landmine problem was nearly as bad as the UXO problem. While I was still out there the U.S. government declassified documents that showed where they dropped the clusters.

How much of the agriculture and livestock were damaged by the war?

BM: If you could find a cow out there you were lucky. The problem was farmers were so anxious to cultivate their crops they were out there before areas had been cleared.

What are your future activities?

BM: I will probably be headed to the Caucasus by the English Republic to look at the situation with refugees coming out of Chechnya. I coordinate emergency response and landmine integration. With 250,000 refugees down in the Caucasus that is something we need to look at. I tell you, you can’t monitor things from Atlanta, Georgia you have to be there on the ground.

There are not a lot of NGOs operating there.

BM: It is tough to get to there and it is quite a dangerous area and that is part of what I am going down there to look at. I am heading out there to see what CARE can do for the people there.

How do you get your job done amid all the hardship the people are encountering?

BM: I am certainly moved by the hardship and I am a passionate person, but when it comes to getting relief and emergency supplies out you have to stay apolitical, and I can’t let my mind start thinking about who did what to whom. It is like going into combat in the U.S. Marines. I was an infantry officer and I started in the Vietnam War, if you let your emotions take over that is when you get people hurt.

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