Notes from the Field: Bosnia

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The biggest problem is to reinforce the lectures with children. "Thank goodness for the Vlajco," says Sinisa Malesevic, programs, which are huge numbers of mines whose whereabouts are unknown. In 1996, the United Nations Association of the United States destroyed by the bombrandments.

As school destroyed by the bombrandments. Photo c/o ICRC/Denis Pope.

It wasn't firewood but a cow that hit Javorac's neighbor Draginja Pertovic had gone to fetch when she was hurt by a mine three years ago. The cow had grazed in the same nearby meadow every day for weeks on end, but when Pertovic attempted to lead her back to the stable on this particular occasion, the animal pulled a trip wire and activated a mine that nearly took Pertovic's life. "I remember being very scared," she says of the days in the hospital in which she lay close to death. "I was not aware of what had happened and stupid thoughts ran through my mind. Like, 'What happened to the cow?' Unbelievable! At the moment, though, it seemed like the most natural question in the world."

With regard to landmines in Doboj, one thing is certain. The end of the problem is nowhere in sight. This has not prevented people from returning to the city, however, whether in search of a house to live in or to recapture a memory of home. Many people would also like to return to Skipovac, a farming community 20 miles from Doboj, but there are few homes to claim and, more importantly, no fields to plow safely. Without land for growing corn and vegetables, there is no income and no food. "Then there is the matter of school for the children. The schoolhouse itself may be safe, but the surrounding area and even the playgrounds are mined. Skipovac's front lines changed so often, in fact, that it is difficult to define any safe areas with certainty.

"We have no choice but to live here," says Nedeljko Zoric, who was born in the village and never left. "So my children have to walk to school in Sjenina every day, 30 minutes each way. They go through mined areas to get there, and frankly I'm terrified. My children are aware of mines and can recognize every single type. I taught them everything I know, but what happens when they're with other children who don't realize the danger? I'm always worried when they go in a group, which is every day. If one of the kids in the group activates a PROM-1 mine, for example, that's a bounding fragmentation mine, well, it would kill or injure everyone standing around him. All it takes to activate it is pulling the tripwire, which looks like any other wire."

Zoric points out that various agencies have visited the village and promised that help would arrive, but says, "sometimes I am scared that it will come too late." In a way, he says, "it is like prison. You have no freedom of movement, no options. You can plow a field or two, but if you need more land, you can't have it because it may not be safe. If you need more income, you can cut wood, but you could get killed doing it. If you want to repair the school, you're welcome to take on the job, but you could die in the yard."

If nothing changes, the handful of other families with school-age children will decide to leave Skipovac, and eventually, Zoric admits, he will also. All that would remain are a few elderly people and bad memories. Under such conditions, who would want to return?

Luka Brcko
Not many years ago, the town of Luka Brcko was as essential to the life of the region as the heart is to the body. Today, this Sava river port is essentially lifeless. A town of ghosts. The Sava separates Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Republic of Croatia, and during the fighting that erupted in 1991, combats on both sides of the river saw anti-personnel mines as an easy way to protect themselves from "the enemy." It did not help the clean-up that the city's status was left unresolved in the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina of 1995. Becko was recently designated a "self-standing district" of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but little else has changed.

Ask former post worker Sreten Simic about Becko's problems, and he says that they are probably
Bosnia

no worse than in other areas, just different. The long
and short of it, though, is that no one feels safe, and
they have little to look forward to. Bekeo’s resi-
dents and would-be returnees dream about the past. What
steps must be taken before the city can contemplate
a future? “For one thing, demining both sides of
the Sava, from west to east,” says Simic. “After all, what’s
the use of clearing down river if mines remain upriver?
Sadly, nobody says anything about this project.”

One type of anti-personnel mine used freely by
combatants in the Sava region, the PMA-3, is a pres-
sure operated blast mine, will give deminers particu-
lar trouble. Constructed entirely of plastic, it eludes
metal detectors and cannot be safely neutralized.

During the war, the Vljegrad plant sustained
extensive damage, and so did the system of power lines
between Zvornik and Srebrenica, about 30 miles
south of Zvornik, through which the electricity feeds
into homes, factories and public works. The Federal
Republic of Yugoslavia supplied some resources for
reconstructing Vljegrad after the war, since Serb Re-
public wasn’t up to the job itself, but the system of
power lines will not last for long without maintenance
and some major repairs. Demining, an expensive
proposition, is a precondition for the entire under-
taking. “We were very happy when they finally started
to work [on the repairs],” said Iljia Javorac, who lives
in a half-reconstructed house with no electricity in
the nearby village of Dynma. “The municipal authori-
 ties promised that electricity will come to our vil-
lage, but nothing actually was going on. Then one
day they came and started working on one of the
utility poles in the hills. It looked promising, but
we were afraid because we knew that it is the area
where fighting took place. And then it happened.
They hit a mine and one man, Dragom Stankovic, got
killed ... I felt guilty, my mouth was dry and strong
pain was eating my stomach.”

Demining in Serb Republic requires interna-
tional funding. A few local agencies, managed by lo-
cal staff, receive support from international demining
programs but must vie for funds with other countries
in need. It has been the government’s plan to estab-
lish local demining capacity, but its moves in this
direction have not been successful as of yet. In the
absence of progress on demining and repairing the
power lines, Javorac and his family have had to make
a difficult decision. Should they live in their own
house without electricity or take over someone else’s
house where there is electricity but also the constant
fear of being ejected by the owners, who could re-
turn any day.

Javorac notes that the lack of electricity also
translates into a lack of running water. Since there is
no local water system, the water for each house must
be pumped from the family well. No electric-
ity, no pump. Javorac points out. “Now we
have to pull [the water] out manually from the
well, like our parents did when they were
young.” Area residents used to make jokes
about it, he reports. “Just like the good old
days!” Javorac goes on to say that, as he and
his neighbors spend more and more time with
out modern, electric powered appliances for
cooking, washing and ironing, they have the feeling
of ‘traveling backwards in time and of
being unable to do anything about it.”

Javorac realizes the immensity of the task
ahead. “It is not only a matter of a few minor
repairs,” he says, “but actually a whole system
of utility poles and wiring. And that costs a lot,
not to mention the demining that will have to
take place before anything else.” Obviously, he
says, “we understand that it will not happen
overnight, but we would be very grateful if we
know that it will ever happen.”

During the war, military leaders of both sides
found it easier to protect large swaths of land by sowing
mines than by stationing soldiers. Local people
used mines to obtain the same type of protection for
themselves. Anti-tank mine fields dominate the re-

region, combined with anti-personnel mines and of-
ten booby traps. Nobody kept records of their mine
laying. Although some of them remember the
mine, moved several times, but you never know from
where to where.

Javorac showed us one well-marked location
where a tank mine that turned up during the demining
operation, a round, plastic TMRP 6 with 11.24 lbs of
TNT that can be activated by 3.30 lbs of pressure.
The explosion of such a mine is so powerful that it
can penetrate two inches of armor at 31-inch range.

The neutralizing of this mine is a very sensitive op-
eration, a job only for experts. As with most of the
mines placed in the country, it was made in Yugosla-
via.

So many mines have been scattered, and they are
being cleared at such a slow pace, that it is difficult
to designate a safe area for cutting down trees, for ex-
ample. Right now wood in abundance is a necessity
for residents of the area, who use it for heating, cook-

ing and washing. People can get hurt collecting wood
even when the terrain is completely familiar. It wasn’t
firewood but a cow that Iljia Javorac’s neighbor
Draginja Perrovic had gone to fetch when she was
hurt by a mine three years ago. The cow had grazed
in the same nearby meadow every day for weeks on
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to the stable on this particular occasion, the animal
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