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Notes from the Field: Croatia

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FROM the FIELD

CROATIA

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The disintegration of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, accelerated by the Communist Party's electoral defeat, spurred the Republic of Croatia to declare its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. As a result, forces from the Republic of Serbia, the largest republic in the former Yugoslavia, launched a campaign to block Croatia's drive for independence. The Croatian Serbs, backed by the Yugoslav government and armed with weapons from the Yugoslavian army, started an armed rebellion against the newly established Croatian government in 1991.

The conflict between Croats and Serbs continued until 1995 when Croatian forces repelled Serb advances and regained control of most occupied areas. These campaigns, known as Brijegas (Flash) and Oluja (Thunderstorm), restored the Croatian government's control over its territory, with the exception of Eastern Slovenia. This area was subsequently reintegrated into Croatia in 1996 as part of the Dayton Peace Accords.

Although the conflict in Croatia has ended, the legacy of nearly 1.5 million landmines deployed during the war remains. These anti-personnel and anti-tank landmines are buried in fields, around farmhouses and along roads throughout the country. Fourteen of Croatia's 21 counties report some level of mine contamination. It is estimated that 6,000 square kilometers of the country's total 56,538 square kilometers is affected by landmines.

Over 20 different types of landmines have been discovered in Croatia, including the MT-4, PMA-2 and PMA-3. These landmines were not only deployed by military forces, but also by paramilitary forces, which primarily used them to inflict damage on civilian populations and infrastructure. Further complicating the situation, very few records documenting the location of mines in Croatia have been kept, making it difficult to target specific areas for demining operations. Croatia now has the second highest concentration of landmine contamination in the world, up to 25 mines per square kilometer. To date, more than 400 civilians, including approximately 200 children, have been killed or wounded by landmines.

Dragalic, Croatia

Dragalic, along with its five surrounding villages: Donji Bogicevac, Gorice, Poljane, Musici and Medari, is located in the Western Slavonia region of Croatia. Just eight kilometers from Nova Gradija, this municipality was exposed to intense fighting during the 1991-1995 Balkan war. In many instances, the frontline ran directly through the area. Hostilities were amplified when the Croats occupied the villages of Musici and Poljane and the Serbs held the villages of Donji Bogicevic, Dragalic and Gorice. As the conflict progressed, these settlements were frequently attacked, burned, or destroyed by opposing forces.

Thousands of anti-personnel and anti-tank landmines were deployed, causing the municipality of Dragalic to become the most heavily mined region in Western Slovenia.

These conflicts shattered communal infrastructures and devastated the region. After the war, the once prosperous area, which included a primary school, post office, police station, farm cooperative, dairy processing plant, timber warehouse, veterinarian station and an outpatient clinic, was in ruins.

Many of the region's 3,000 inhabitants returned to their land and cleared agricultural fields, homes and grazing lands had been mined. Routine activities such as cultivating agricultural areas, were now life-threatening actions. Unfortunately, the need for food and income has forced many residents to continue working their land, despite the dangers of landmines.

Nikola Katic, a resident of Gorice village, found himself in this situation. Unable to support his family without income from his crops, Nikola continued to cultivate his field, even though he knew it to be mined. Tragedy struck in March 1999 as he drove his tractor over a PRA-I anti-personnel landmine.

Unfortunately, Nikola, like many other people in the area, is now afraid to go into the fields, he continues to cultivate his crops. He recognizes the inherent dangers of his activities, but feels that he has no other alternative, although he has witnessed Nikola's misfortune and located and removed two mines from his own land.

All residents in the municipality of Dragalic face the same dilemma. Although landmines and unexploded ordnance have been discovered throughout the region, residents are determined to continue living as normal lives as possible. They use mined paths, fields and roads everyday or demine these areas themselves.

Pakrac and Kusonje, Croatia

The villages of Pakrac and Kusonje, located in Western Slavonia along the river Pakra and in the municipality of Pakrac, are centuries old. Pakrac, founded in the 14th century, is an area of great his-
Landmines impede reconstruction and the return of refugees.

*CROATIA*

Authoritative, containing medieval forts and buildings. Unfortunately, the 1991-1995 war between the Serbs and Croats inflicted heavy damage on the region. Hundreds of people were killed or injured and residential buildings, shops and infrastructure were destroyed.

The difficult task of rebuilding has begun. In 1996, a reconstruction and repatriation program was initiated. Since that time, 12,000 of the 29,500 residents have returned. However, the lack of infrastructure, residential buildings and employment opportunities has complicated this process. Before the war, most people worked in the wood, textile or agriculture industries. Sadly, the wood processing plant is now closed and the textile factory must be rebuilt. Agricultural activity is almost impossible because of the prevalence of landmines.

Approximately 110 square kilometers in the area is reportedly contaminated by anti-personnel and anti-tank landmines, which were laid during the Serbian occupation of the area. Although the Croatian government is attempting to clear the land, its efforts have focused on demining residential areas, including houses, buildings and areas 50 meters from these buildings. The funding and resources needed to demine large tracts of agricultural land do not exist. These efforts are further complicated by the fact that few adequate records exist of the location and types of landmines. This is because armed units were frequently rotated through the area and paramilitary organizations repeatedly deployed mines during the conflict.

Authorities have tried to address the situation by supporting mine awareness and education programs. Nevertheless, economic necessity often forces residents to enter mined agricultural and wooded areas. They also bury their dead and visit deceased relatives in two mined cemeteries in the region, continually placing their lives in danger. Veljko Dzakula, a member of Pakrac's city council, has said that mines prevent the people of Pakrac and Kusonje from leading normal lives. Movement in villages is often restricted to the yards around houses and agricultural activity is severely impeded. According to Veljko, most people are killed by landmines while passing through the local forest from one village to another. Since 1995, 40 people have died in Pakrac municipality as a result of landmine-related injuries, and many more have been seriously injured.

The experience of Bosko Goli, another resident of Pakrac, illustrates the psychological pressures that many landmine victims endure. This 45-year-old Serb worked in the wood processing plant before the war, but fled the area in 1995. After returning home in 1997, he had a near fatal encounter with a PPR-2A anti-personnel landmine. While walking in the Kalvarija forest near Pakrac, he accidentally pulled a tripwire attached to the mine, causing it to detonate. By chance, the shelter provided by surrounding trees and his distance from the center of the blast allowed him to escape unharmed. However, his good fortune is marred by the fact that the area is still mined and one of Bosko's cousins was recently killed by a landmine. As a result, Bosko continually fears for his life, the lives of his children and the well-being of his neighbors. Until the area is cleared of mines, the residents of Pakrac will continue to face the dangers of these indiscriminate weapons of war.

All residents of Croatia face the same dilemma. Although landmines and unexploded ordnance have been discovered throughout the region, residents are determined to continue living as normal lives as possible. They use mined paths, fields and roads every day. Sometimes they demine areas for themselves. Only when the landmines and UXO have been completely removed will residents be able to live in a secure and prosperous environment.

Stojan Radi, a 72-year-old Serbian resident of Pakrac, was wounded by a landmine. After fleeing the area during the initial stages of the Balkan war, he returned in 1997 to find his house burned and his property destroyed. However, he was optimistic when a hunter told him the forested area around his house had been demined by the army. Believing it was safe, Stojan entered the forest to gather some chestnuts.

He inadvertently stepped on a PNA-3 anti-personnel landmine, severely injuring one of his legs. Unable to find help, Stojan cut off part of his leg and tied the rest with his belt to stop the bleeding. After more than two hours, a neighbor found him in the forest and drove him to the hospital, where half of his leg was amputated.

Today, Stojan is able to function with a prosthetic leg, but he finds it difficult to walk.