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Demining in Bihac With 5 Korpusa of the Bosnian Army

Despite the end to years of brutal fighting in Bosnia, landmines left behind from the war still threaten the safety of local populations. The following article gives a firsthand experience of a former Canadian soldier's demining experience in Bosnia alongside the Bosnian Army.

by Peter Hindy, Former Canadian Soldier

Introduction

On September 12, 2001, I arrived under guard and made my way to the top of the hill in Cerkiti, Bihac, Bosnia. I had a very strange, yet distinct sinking feeling from the tragedies of the terrorist attacks of the previous day. As I walked up the hill, I felt that I would have to somehow prove past the usual morning smile and cheerfulness that I was not personally angry and vengeful at the Muslim world for the actions taken by the poor excuse for soldiers who committed the attacks against the innocent people of New York City. It is still hard to believe that these and these brave men fought for the 5th Corps of the Bosnian Army (BSSWJ) and for what they thought was right. They were the finest people I have ever known. At first, the deminers would not initiate the usual conversation and a few who passed by the ears, I explained to the other deminers that it was normal to feel tentative today towards me, a Wester, as such a terrible thing had happened. After a short period of hesitant conversation, I presented with the following statement, "Now people in America know that it was like in my town every day."

The minesfield being cleared here today is one of many laid in 1992 during the conflict. In fact, 60 percent of these mines are unknown and unmarked, and the people who laid them may be long dead. The belts of protective and tactical minefields on this land in this particular field of 50,000 square meters changed hands as many as nine times during bloody battles to hold just a few hundred yards either way. Men died taking this ground. Sometimes photos, watches and other personal items are found—testimony to what the world allowed to happen here in this country two hours from London. For the men of BSSWJ, the war continues to date from seven or six to two in the more than 30°C heat. Sweat, headaches, dirt, lack of proper food and water at times and the never-ending attention to detail to not become complacent were amongst the number of problems we faced. Complicity means death. But still the morale is maintained and life goes on through the good and the bad times in the demining business.

There are many reasons for each man to pay attention to ensure this tough job gets done right—the greatest of which is the human cost of war. I was reminded of the human casualties daily in the distance by the white patches of Bosnian and international volunteer fighters buried on the horizon in the military cemetery, and by the tombstones bearing the names of the dead, such as Vukovar, Laskovo, and Strebenci. These men paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom, and the nine men of BSSWJ were doing their part in the success of every soldier who died trying to do the right thing. Every day under the gentle wind and thunderous silence of peace, the team carefully advance further into the ground that had not been ventured on since traces split the air and screaming bombs had not shattered lives and hopes for the future from sons of fathers and mothers with animal-like
MASG in the Balkans

In order for members of the Mine Action Support Group (MASG) to fully understand mine action programs and to study the implementation of mine action at the national level, several MASG representatives visited and met with government and UN representatives in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This article describes the discoveries and conclusions they made on their trip.

by Lt Col Klaus-Peter Koschany, German Permanent Mission to the United Nations

Introduction

To allow representatives of MASG to see mine action programs in the respective countries and to study the implementation of mine action at the national level, the representatives visited Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina from May 22 to May 22, 2003. Meetings were held with relevant government representatives of Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, Slovenia, and Albania as well as with UN representatives accredited in these states.

The field mission started in Slovenia, with a reception hosted by State Secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ms. Samuel Bogar. The delegation, consisting of a representative of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) as well as delegates from seven member states (Austria, Canada, Germany, Finland, Japan, Slovenia, and Switzerland), was led by Ambassador Harald Braun, chairman of MASG.

The participants were interested in learning about programs of implementation so they can offer solutions supported by the international community. The International Trust Fund (ITF) in Europe, in particular, is a good example.

Note: Petr Hindy is currently an unemployed professional and can be contacted at his e-mail address (see below).

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The participants, from left to right: Mohammad Younas (UNMAS), Tadej Furlan (Slovenia), Cory Anderson (Canada), Sebastian Kasick (SINRAS), Dr. Janine Voigt (Switzerland), Lt Col Klaus-Peter Koschany (German Permanent Mission to the United Nations (Germany), Mr. Jernej Compassic (Slovenia), Jarkko Lehtovirta (Finland), Ljiljada Defiel Schroeder (Germany) and Yukito Okada (Japan).

The Albanian Mine Action Program

A survey carried out in 1999, illustrates the mine threat in Albania. In northeastern Albania, a 120-km border has 102 areas contaminated with anti-personnel mines and anti-tank mines from the former Republic of Yugoslavia, as well as unexploded North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ordnance, covering an area totaling some 15,253 km², with no available records. The defining effects of the international community and those of the Albanian Mine Action Centre (AMAC) have not only reduced the contaminated areas by half, but have also led to substantial progress in the area of mine risk education (MRE) and victim assistance.

The strategic objectives of AMAC from the export of mines and UXO by 2005, seems realistic, although not easy to achieve. Nevertheless, a shortfall of $0.58 million (U.S.) for the demining program in Albania for this year was noted. For the next two years, $3.9 million per year will be needed to reach the goal of a mine-free country.

ITF

The ITF is headquartered in Slovenia, the only mine-free country in the Balkans. ITF activities are focused on the other Balkan states and are also being extended to be mine-adjusted states such as Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Its activities comprise demining, mine victim assistance, support for demining structures and training. Further, a Geographical Information System (GIS) for Demining in Southeast Europe will be developed under the ITF’s auspices. During the five years of its existence, the ITF has raised a total of $111.2 million. Eighty percent of these funds were used for demining, with roughly half of this...