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Mine Action in Bosnia’s Special District: A Case Study

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Mine Action in Bosnia's Special District

No, no, don't look at the sky. They cannot do any harm from above anymore, Lower your head because your mother earth.

If you have survived the war, try to survive the peace.

— Melisa Drazović, schoolgirl, Bosnia and Herzegovina¹

by Matthew Bolton, Counterpart International

The Brcko District

The Brcko Municipality, located in northeastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, was a fierce battleground during the war from 1992 to 1995. Because of the Brcko District's unique, strategic and symbolic significance to all sides of the conflict, it was the only issue left unresolved by the Dayton Peace Accords that ended the war in December 1995, which had divided the country into two decentralized semi-autonomous entities.²

The Republika Srpska (populated mostly by Serbs) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (populated mostly by Bosnians and Croats) disagreed over which political and administrative boundaries should be established.

According to the United Nations, writing at the end of December 2001, "Up to one million mines, mostly antipersonnel, and many types of unexploded ordnance (UXO) still take an unacceptable toll on innocent victims" in Bosnia and Herzegovina.³ Frighteningly, only about 60 percent of mined areas have been identified.

Mine landmines in the country are concentrated on the Zone of Separation (ZOS), the four-lan wide demilitarized zone along the former frontline and three concentric rings: Sarajevo, Zavidović and Brcko.⁴ Obviously, one of the highest concentrations is where the ZUS runs through the Brcko District, the area from which most refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) fled or were expelled but where they are now returning.

The Brcko District formed the narrowest point of the Republika Srpska's (RS) vital supply corridor from Serbia and the western RS to the eastern RS. The Brcko District's highly strategic location made it an area of bitter and heavy fighting throughout the war. This "has made it one of the most heavily mine contaminated areas of the entire BH.⁵

Unfortunately, the landmine situation in Brcko has changed little over the last few years. According to the PRONI Institute of Social Education's Brcko District Mine Awareness Team, "From 1996 to now, there were 11,000,000 m² of high risk areas and by the end of 2002, only 2,940,000 m² will have been demined, meaning the demining process will take another 10 to 15 more years."⁶

The BHMAC "Demining Strategy for Bosnia and Herzegovina," noted in 2001 that 97.6 square km in the Brcko District are "dangerous areas" or a total of 12.04 percent of the total Brcko District territory. These numbers contrast with 6.56 percent in the Federation, 1.71 percent in the Republika Srpska and a country-wide average of 4.20 percent.⁷ Of this total 12 percent of territory, there are an estimated 86,700 landmines and 8,100 UXO.⁸ Moreover, there have been almost 100 mine/UXO accidents (almost 10 percent of all the mine accidents in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and 38 deaths since the war in the Brcko District.⁹

¹ Only 60 percent of mined areas in the Brcko region have been identified.

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These casualties have led the OHCHR to launch a key international community body that oversees the civilian implementation of the peace process. To declare "demining and civil protection," the Brcko District as a "crucial condition for sustainability of returns, improving both the economic and social environment." 19

Human Impact

Threat to Food Security

Landmines throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina are a major threat to food security, illustrated by the fact that, "The typical mine victim in the past-conflict period is the individual miner." As stated by the U.S. DOS, "The impact is even greater on the individual farmer, who has only a small farm with a large portion potentially infected by landmines, leaving him unable to support his family." 20 Consequently, the United Nations has estimated a loss of a mixed and environmentally sustainable rural economy is seriously jeopardised by mine and UXO pollution.

This concern is intimately connected to the landmine situation in the Brcko District. The Brcko District lies in a thin, but fertile agricultural belt called the Brcko Corridor—well irrigated by three rivers and good rainfall. Before the war, it represented an agricultural and food producing area in the former Yugoslavia. As the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) points out: "Since 75 percent of ... Bosnia and Herzegovina is classified as mountainous, there is heavy reliance for strategic food production on the scarce fertile land in the north." 21

According to the ICRC, the climate and soil conditions are particularly suited to the production of cereals, soybean, fruits (especially plums), berries and medicinal herbs. 22

Unfortunately, as noted above, the Brcko District is also one of the most heavily mined areas in the country. According to the ICRC, "Many mines still in the ground have contaminated fertile agricultural land, severely reducing food production while Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to rely on international assistance to feed its population." 23 According to the ICRC, "Threats to food security are many reasons for demining. According to international estimations, it is the critical minimum necessary for ensuring food for the population. A significant cost for such agricultural land contaminated with mines and UXO." 24

In the Brcko District specifically, "Some 500 HA of arable land and 550 HA of forest require immediate demining." According to the FAO, "The main reason for agricultural land abandonment [in the Brcko District] is the presence of mines [as stated by experts and the local population]." 25

This means that the Brcko District's agricultural development, stunted by the landmine crisis, is having a hugely detrimental effect on the food security situation throughout the country. Through demining, Brcko's rural economy can be revived, restoring the District to its position of a food producer for the rest of the country.

Threat to the Return Process

The Brcko District has one of the highest rates of return of refugees and IDPs. While there are many reasons for this high return rate, it is primarily caused by the District's unique legal position as an autonomous region with a major national government and progressive laws. Retired U.S. Ambassador Robert W. Farrand, former OHCHR Supervisor, described this cycle as a "microcosm of the peace process."

The "right of return" to one's pre-war home was one of the most important stipulations of both the Dayton Peace Accords and the Brcko Final Arbitral Award. However, landmines pose a continued threat to this process. The ICRC points out, "Pressure on land will grow...as refugees and displaced persons return to their pre-war communities, many of which are situated in the ZOS—the most heavily mined area of the country." 26

In many situations, mine clearance is a precondition for the safe return of refugees and people displaced by war from their homes. 27

The ICRC points out that mines are "making the return of refugees and displaced persons to...[the north]...hazardous, especially since many of these people will inevitably take to farming to meet their dietary needs." 28 Moreover, since they have been out of the region, many refugees and IDPs are often unaware of the precise locations of former front-line positions and the local markings used to identify dangerous areas. 29 This has led to refugees and internally displaced people making "up approximately 1/3 of total [mine-related] casualties since the war..." 30

Therefore, the UN states that "The demining program must develop links with long-term development programs to stimulate investment in productive activities and to return to farms and find constructive solutions to long-term funding issues."

Brcko District's Current Mine Action

By saying, "It is not so much about mines as it is about people," the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has defined this action in a holistic sense that refers to "all those activities geared towards addressing the problems faced by populations as a result of landmine contamination." Therefore, "In his aim is not technical—to survey, mark and eradicate landmines—but humanitarian and developmental." 31

Taking this into account, when looking at the Brcko District’s current mine action activities it is necessary to examine not only mine clearance, but also mine awareness and victims assistance.

Mine Clearance

At the onset of the Dayton Peace Accords, Bosnia and Herzegovina was divided into two decentralized entities, the Federation and the Republica Srpska. Up until this point the EOC was responsible for mine clearance activities and 49 mines/UXO in response to civilian calls. 32 Last year (before the Brcko was established) the VRS was destroyed by good weather conditions, there was much mine action activity and almost one million square meters cleared. In contrast with the Federation and the Republica Srpska, which met 45 percent and 21 percent of their 2002 targets for mine clearance respectively, the Brcko District cleared 76 percent of its targeted areas for 2002. 33

This progress has also been encouraged by the falling costs of demining due to a proliferation of private commercial demining companies. The average price for demining a simple, non-forest, flat field is now approximately $1.85. 34 For safe budgeting purposes, according to OHCHR, one should budget $25 per square meter when estimating costs. 35

In 2002, before the establishment of the VRS, the vast majority of the funding in the Brcko District was done by NGOs, especially local NGOs—due to specific restrictions last year's donor plowed on their funds. Table 1 shows the different organizations that were involved in demining in the Brcko District in 2002 and the area totally demined by them and certified by BHMAC.


Victim Assistance (IFT), an organization serving the government which is "a favored funding vehicle for international donors" as all funds IFT raises are matched by the U.S. Department of State, IFT operates by matching the funds of other donors who fund demining in the region. Landmines, IFT funded the clearance of 700,000 square meters of land in the Brcko District, costing $1.2 million. Unfortunately, IFT funding to the region from 1996 to 2000 has been slowly declining. In 2000, IFT allocated 52 percent of its total funding to the country whereas in 2002, it allocated only 28.6 percent. Another possible issue with IFT is that some people believe its mode of operation tends to favor the commercial methods of contracting tenders for mine clearance. They argue the organization is not really set up to encourage humanitarian NGO demining. However, it may be possible for private donors to specify the exact conditions in which they wish to see their IFT's matching funds to be used in a project.

Addition funding for mine clearing in the Brcko District derives from the Czech Republic, the Government of Japan (through the German NGO HELP which withdraws from the country this February), BHMAC and the Brcko District Government, which covers salaries, insurance, office space and some small amounts of equipment. While the Government of Japan has funded a great deal of mine action in the Brcko District and it is well noted for its flexible funding conditions, it unfortunately froze all funding to the Brcko District in December 2002 due to alleged financial irregularities and misuse in a local demining project.

In its planning for 2003, CivPro has prioritized 39 minefields totaling 21.9 million square meters, most of which is agricultural land, rural remanant housing or river banks (as seen in matrix, end of document). The prioritization process is less a political decision than a bureaucratic one. Priority areas are selected by a team of representatives from OHR, CivPro, the Brcko District Department of Agriculture and BHMAC, based on the following criteria:

- Priority 1: Locations in regular civilian use; repatriation of refugees and displaced persons; renewal and reconstruction of infrastructure.
- Priority 2: Areas in the immediate vicinity of Priority 1 areas, and areas which enable people to make a living such as agricultural land and forestry.
- Priority 3: All remaining areas. BHMAC records estimate that 17.7 square kilometers, or 30 percent of the mine areas in the Brcko District, are Priority 1, 17.7 square kilometers or 30 percent are Priority 2 and 2.5 square kilometers or 41 percent is Priority 3.

One should be aware that BHMAC has its own priority list for the Brcko District, which differs somewhat from those of CivPro because BHMAC covers the whole country rather than just the District. Thus, some minefields may be high priority compared to others in the District but low when compared to the whole country. When designing a mine action project, both priority lists should be taken into account, although NPA believes that when doing humanitarian demining in a local community, local priorities should trump national concerns.

Additional funds. As of June 2003, CivPro contracted International Humanitarian Demining and Development NGO based in Washington DC and funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was the only company working on the whole project funding demining in 2003.

CivPro (and other demining organizations) are currently negotiating a new contract with the government for the coming season. They argue that because there is no more funding from other sources it is now time to negotiate. The temperature must be over 5°C to Centigrade and there cannot be any snow on the ground before demining can start. Therefore, the season runs approximately from the beginning of April to the end of November.

The winter months are used for administrative work and planning.

One method of raising mine awareness is clearly demarcating minefields with high barbed wire fences and signs. However, there has been considerable debate in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the appropriateness of this method. Due to the relatively low cost of diamondback fencing (when compared to other countries), demining areas does not cost much more than marking them properly.

Instead, some agencies have marked the minefields with cheaper fence posts and signage. Unfortunately, these are often stolen and used for other purposes (e.g., building houses or for training vine plants or signs placed on houses to prevent burglary). In addition, the lack of proper marking of minefields, it will make people assume that unmarked areas are safe. For this reason, in many areas, including the Brcko District, minefields are marked just before and during clearance activities.

Taking these factors into account, according to the 2000 Annual Report, "The Demining Commission chooses instead to focus on mine risk education through schools and local media." A clearer and more effective assessment of priorities will be available at the end of the year with the completion of the "Bosnia and Herzegovina Landmines Impact Survey," a project funded by IFT and headed up by Handicap International in partnership with BHMAC and the Survey Action Center. This survey will "profile the condition and development of mines and on communities. Based on this information, "national priorities can be established."

As of June 2003, the Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) had not decided on a new contract for mine clearance. While the ICRC has probably been the most active and effective organization raising awareness of mines and UXO through their local partner, the Bosnia and Herzegovina Red Cross Society. According to their literature, "In 2001 alone, a total of 6,398 presentations were held and 6,504 'discussion groups' conducted with 170,644 adults and child participants throughout the country."

The methodology employed in the ICRC Community-Based Program (as opposed to their media campaigns) is to train volunteers from the local Red Cross chapters and pay them a small stipend of about $15 a month to carry out presentations and demonstrations. The ICRC program has two volunteers in the Brcko District, one on the Federation side of the Inter-Ethnic Boundary Line (IBL) and one on the Republika Srpska side. They focus their efforts on children. However, as a result of evaluations conducted last year, the ICRC has determined it must refocus its mine awareness program on "the highest risk groups" such as farmers, hunters and returnees.

In addition to the ICRC's efforts, the government does assist with mine awareness in a variety of ways. For instance, "All primary schools in BH are supposed to conduct mine awareness lessons each school year" and "In December 2000, the EMAC ran a five-day training course for policemen in Brcko, who qualified to work as mine awareness instructors."

The NATO-led Stabilization Force (SFOR) and UNHCR have also conducted such work sporadically. The most effective mine awareness program in the Brcko District, however, is the program operated by the Swedish/ Northern Irish NGO, the PRONI Institute of Social Education. It has been operating a mine awareness program since May 2000 with funding from the Japanese Government and U.S. Embassy Sarajevo Office of Public Affairs. According to the 2002 Landmine Monitor Report, "In 2001 six [PRONI] mine risk education instructors gave 186 presentations to 6,990 people, and distributed 906 posters, 600 leaflets, 2,700 brochures, 1,700 badges, and 50 t-shirts. They have also hosted two mine awareness summer camps in cooperation with UNICEF and WorldVision and participated in UNDP's national media campaign.

As of early spring 2003, PRONI is a fully accredited member of the BHMAC Implementation Group for Mine Risk Education and a member of the BHMAC Mine Risk Education Coordination team. At the time of writing they were negotiating for 2003 funding from the U.S. Embassy and from UNICEF.

Unfortunately, it is much easier to raise the awareness of children (while in
school they are a captive audience) than of the world's less-density suburbs and urban areas where both the number of adults and in the suburbs specifically there are problems with health problems rates of smokers and former smokers, paying little attention to the benefits of lifestyle. Therefore, the PRONI team has a multicellular approach, using different methods to reach different audiences. A recent project focused especially on high-risk groups such as hunters and fishermen.

One major problem with mine awareness in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which no organization seems to have found a solution, is that mine awareness projects have generally taken the form of media campaigns and presentations/lectures about the dangers of mines. While this method is especially useful right after war, when a population may be too afraid to be aware of the dangers, it grows more ineffective as people begin to understand the danger, but engage in high-risk behavior anyway either for economic, psychological or social reasons. According to the ICRC, “Over the years, we can see an increase of the perceived mine threat to people in known dangerous areas.”

Nathalie Plevò, UNICEF adviser to BHMAC for Mine Risk Education says what is needed is a participatory, community-based model, modified after agricultural extension work, that engages with communities and communities working with them to develop locally-based decision processes on how to manage the mine/UXO contamination problem.

Victim Assistance

Concerned efforts as victim assistance in the Bečko District, like in many parts of the country, are not conducted on a large scale. Aneža Tatarović, Coordinator for Demining in the Bečko District says this is mainly due to the lack of coordination and poor visibility between the various organizations. A multi-sectoral association was established in 1997, the association has over 150 members (many of whom are mine victims) and is self-generating through a cooperative approach. They are engaged in social support, medical support, political advocacy and public consciousness-raising activities. Last year, with 6000 euros of funding from the European Union, the Bečko District Parliaments’s Association hosted a sports gathering of such mine victims and survivors. In addition, LSN is providing help to them at the first of its kind in 15 years. They held a wheelchair basketball tournament and a chess competition. The event was covered in both local and national media and it raised the community’s awareness of the issues facing persons with disabilities. It was the first annual event, and their efforts are a vital part of building a civil society network for disabled persons that will form a natural, local support system for mine victims in the Bečko District.

Conclusion

As one of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s most heavily mined areas, Bečko District mine action is somewhat held back due to the unique geo-political circumstances that place it in the jurisdiction of military deminers and beyond the close attention from the EMAG’s up until this year. On the other hand, this geopolitical significance has also piqued the interest of international donors and NGOs, which means that despite the Bečko District’s mine problem, it is still being addressed to create a relatively well developed mine action sector.

There is still room for improvement. Firstly, Bečko District mine action should take a stronger role in coordinating efforts, as well as a more pro-active role in reaching out to the Bečko District Government for appropriation, mine action and developing foreign donors, which should occur naturally as CoP Profs finds its feet and becomes more established. Making the Bečko mine risk free is not only a commendable initiative but also possible to take about $5 million were appropriated for mine action per year for the next five years. All that is required is for the Bečko District Government (which has had large budget surpluses for the last two years) to make demining a priority and for some funds to be allocated for mine action programs. The examples of highly successful mine action programs in Kuwait and Kosovo should also be considered as potential models which demining can be done when the political will are resources are there.

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