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Unsung Heroes: Adnana Handzic

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SPECIAL REPORT: UNsung HEROES

by Charlotte Dombrower, MAIC

ADNANA HANDZIC

Adnana Handzic has been called a heroine in the world of mine action because of her work at the Bosnia-Herzegovina Mine Action Center (BHMAC). She began working there shortly after its inception in 1996 and has never looked back. Dedicated to creating well-designed mine awareness programs throughout her career, Handzic has been a key player in mine action in the last nine years. Currently working for the U.N. Development Programme Bosnia-Herzegovina (UNDP BiH) as a project assistant, she continues to leave her mark.

Handzic's involvement in mine action began shortly after the war in Bosnia where she worked as a language assistant for the British engineers' squadron, the Implementation Force. In 1997, "I attended the Mine Awareness Course along with other 'soldiers,'" she says. The course sparked her interest; soon thereafter she began working for the BHMAC as a Mine Awareness Instructor at the young age of 19. "Since then, I have attended numerous projects, trainings, workshops and other MRE/MA [mine risk education/mine action] events," says Handzic. Now 27, she feels that throughout her career at the MAC she has not only gained the satisfaction of helping improve the landmine situation in Bosnia but also benefited personally. "Through field work experience with local people and international people working in the MAC," Handzic explains, "I have developed personal knowledge, skills and understanding of overall mine action and the role of MRE as one of the five main pillars of mine action."

According to Handzic, in the last two years, MRE in BiH has made huge strides due to an "amazing and intensively hardworking period." She continues, "The period also involved my huge personal attention required for shifting the MRE 'service delivery' approach into community engagement and ownership over the mine problem," explains Handzic. As a member of the BHMAC team, Handzic committed herself to implementing this new MRE approach as well as teaching it to other community facilitators and MRE managers. She also devoted her time to facilitating participatory workshops for designing different technical MRE documentation and drafting and revising national MRE standards on which she collaborated with Nathalie Prevost, an MRE Advisor for the United Nations Children's Fund.

"A few months ago, I left the BiH MRE scene as I felt that it was time for me to move on; I left a well-established MAC MRE capacity behind me to carry on where I stopped," Handzic says.

Handzic's hard work on the MRE programs seems to have paid off. "Nowadays, coordination of MRE is effective, projects are community-oriented, cooperation between stakeholders is at a much higher level and finally BiH community ownership is being tackled," she states proudly. However, Handzic admits that this accomplishment took strenuous effort and dedication: "Being one of the key players in setting up an integrated MRE [program], I had to be an enthusiastic, confident and hardworking individual in order to encourage others to effectively and in an organized manner participate in saving lives of BiH citizens."

Moving on to the Human Security Portfolio of the UNDP BiH as project assistant for the Integrated Mine Action Programme and the Small Arms/Light Weapons Project, she has taken on her new projects with just as much hope and dedication as her previous projects. She is also responsible for the creation, coordination and updating of the BiH mine action website (see contact information below). "New challenges are ahead of me and I am very happy for this opportunity," Handzic says optimistically.

Handzic is hopeful about the future of the landmine situation: "For Bosnia, I expect



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADNANA HANDZIC

Adnana Handzic at the opening ceremony of 14 demining sites in summer 2004.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADNANA HANDZIC

Handzic giving a group of young children a lesson on mine awareness.

self thinking of mine action strategies while she is out of the office. "These thoughts intensified when I became a mother. ... Where will my boy wander when playing with friends? Being a three year-old, [he] already knows what the threats [of] mines and guns are!" exclaims Handzic.

While Handzic has seen vast accomplishments during her nine-year involvement in mine action, she also acknowledges the issues that need to be changed. "Definitely community participation in mine action planning and priority setting should be improved,

since [voices of the] affected population, in many cases, are not heard," she says. "Community liaison as a tool for community participation and education should be involved in all activities of mine action operations, ensuring a two-way flow of information, which can provide safety and security for people and improvement of the community's socio-economic situation," Handzic adds.

Handzic concludes that there will always be room for development and growth in mine action, as it is an unending project. "What is so tempting in mine action is that it is a quite 'new' field of work [that] is improving almost on a daily basis. New research, studies and surveys almost always indicate the need for advancement of certain mine action components and activities." She explains that mine action is ongoing and alive, and if you want to work in it and be successful, you have to follow trends and work hard. ♦

See "References and Endnotes" on page 105

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that a revised mine action strategy will be successfully implemented by 2009, and on a global level. I hope that the donors will maintain their focus on mine action."

Without money as an obstacle, Handzic has a clear vision of what she could accomplish in mine action in the future. If given the opportunity, "I would clear all contaminated areas around the world ... to [allow] children to play and explore freely and carelessly. I would protect all landmines survivors and their families and would provide them opportunities for normal life and work." She adds, "And last but not least, I would focus more on the protection of deminers and their families."

Although frustrating and disheartening at times, mine action helps Handzic to develop a strong character and become more passionate about her work. "It is hard not to be emotionally affected when it comes to mine victims," she admits. "I do get frustrated knowing the consequences of [lives] affected by landmine presence and not being able to do anything by myself."

However, Handzic keeps her mind in focus and comforts herself with the phrase "I am not alone" to keep herself from giving up on the often emotionally draining tasks at hand. "Every time a landmine accident occurs, it leaves me with the impression that this is not the best we can do, and that we should be able to do more together," she says. Handzic has been a team player and realizes that she never could have accomplished her goals without the loyal support of her colleagues and peers. Her involvement in mine action does not stop at the workplace, either. She often finds her-