

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 21

Issue 1 *Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction*

Issue 21.1

Article 6

2017

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Recommended Citation

Mansfield, Ian (2017) "The Early Years of Demining in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Transfer to National Ownership," *Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol21/iss1/6>

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The Early Years of Demining in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Transfer to National Ownership

by Ian Mansfield



Ian Mansfield stands in front of damaged apartments in Sarajevo. Photo courtesy of the author.

After the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords on 14 December 1995, the newly formed Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina requested that the United Nations set up and manage a mine clearance program. However, it soon became clear that the government should take responsibility and ownership of the program.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina took place between April 1992 and October 1995. While the causes of the war and what happened are extremely complicated, Bosnian Serbs encircled Sarajevo and imposed a blockade, while ‘ethnic cleansing’ operations were undertaken by all sides in towns and villages throughout the country.

As a result of the Dayton Peace Accords, the fighting stopped, and Bosnia and Herzegovina was to remain one country; however, it was divided into two entities: the Republika Srpska and the Muslim-Croat Federation. The country was to be governed by the Council of Ministers, consisting of one representative each from the Bosnian Croats, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). These representatives would

share the presidency on a rotating basis, and elections were to be held to elect a parliament. Each entity was allowed to keep its own army, but a large, international military force called the Stabilization Force (SFOR) was deployed throughout the country to enforce the peace.

The Landmine Problem

As the fighting was intended to drive people out of their homes, landmines were used extensively throughout the conflict to keep people away from villages. Large, front-line areas developed along the boundaries between different ethnic groups, and mines were also laid in vast numbers to protect these areas.

The majority of the known minefields in Bosnia and Herzegovina were located along the 1,000 km (621 mi) long Inter-Entity Boundary Line, which divided Republika Srpska. The Muslim Croat Federation Records of over 18,000 minefields were available but toward the end of the war, many mines were laid without being recorded, and it was estimated that these maps represented only 50 to 60 percent of the minefields in the country. At the time when the Dayton Peace Accords came into effect, many believed that there could be up to one million landmines laid in Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with an unknown number of unexploded ordnance (UXO) waiting to be cleared. Accurate casualty figures were difficult to obtain, but there seemed to be general agreement that about 50 civilians were killed or injured by landmines or UXO every month since the end of the war in 1995.¹

Initial Response

In January 1996, the fledgling Bosnian government requested United Nations’ assistance with setting up a mine action program. The responsibility fell to the United Nations Mission in Bosnia Herzegovina (UNMIBH), which established the

United Nations Mine Action Centre (UNMAC) in June 1996. As part of the transition of the mine action program to national ownership, a rather complex set of organizational changes were agreed upon by the Council of Ministers and the United Nations in October 1997. Responsibility for the mine action program was planned to transfer from UNMIBH to the government on 1 January 1998. However, the government was not ready, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) took over the interim responsibility. The government set up the Commission for Demining, the role of which was to keep the Council of Ministers informed on the progress of demining in the country, to approve national mine action plans and standards, and to oversee the work of UNMAC. The Commission for Demining consisted of three members: a Bosnian Serb, a Bosnian Croat, and a Bosniak; and they effectively performed the role of the national mine action authority.

UNMAC would transition to become the Bosnia Herzegovina Mine Action Centre (BHMIC) and it would be responsible for managing all central database records, setting priorities and issuing task orders, overseeing quality management or standards of work being done, and raising funds. The Republika Srpska and the Muslim-Croat Federation would set up their own offices to supervise and undertake mine clearance.

Mine Clearance Actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina

However, UNMAC was not the only program in the country. Beginning in 1996, foreign governments began bilateral support for demining in Bosnia, with Norway funding Norwegian People's Aid (NPA). As the first civilian organization to work in Bosnia, NPA focused on clearing important infrastructure projects, cultural heritage monuments, and damaged houses and apartments in support of refugee settlement programs in Sarajevo. The German government funded the trial of two demining machines, and a German bomb disposal school trained Bosnian refugees in Germany. The Belgium government funded two technical advisers to the Demining Commission.

In 1997, via the entity governments, the World Bank financed mine clearance operations by international commercial companies, all of whom had established subcontracts or joint venture arrangements with local commercial mine clearance companies. This was the first time the World Bank had funded mine clearance work, and it was not without its difficulties. Over US\$10 million was made available to commercial companies, leading to the sudden formation of 40 local companies.



Norwegian People's Aid deminer in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Photo courtesy of the author.

Fourteen contracts were awarded, but the majority of the money went through two international companies: MineTech and RONCO. Both were reputable companies and had established partnerships with some Bosnian companies, one for each of the three ethnic groups. However, in early 1998, MineTech pulled out of Bosnia, and—due to a disagreement with the World Bank—the United States withdrew its funds from the World Bank and gave the money directly to RONCO.

A debate occurred regarding the merits of using commercial companies for mine clearance as opposed to nonprofit organizations, like nongovernmental organizations (NGO) or government agencies. The pro-commercial argument was that commercial companies were more efficient because they were in a competitive environment. The counter-argument was that commercial companies only assumed easy tasks, and it was alleged that the local Bosnian companies cut corners and compromised on safety to keep their costs down. On the other hand, the NGOs said that they focused on house clearance, which was slow but necessary in Bosnia, as refugees needed to be able to return home. The various commercial companies and NGOs endeavored to produce figures to estimate their clearance costs per square meter. However, it is the author's opinion that the figures were neither accurate nor convincing.

In the former Yugoslavia, a government body called the Civil Protection Organization (CPO) dealt with natural disasters like fires and floods, and was also responsible for civilian bomb disposal. In Bosnia, the CPO still existed albeit in a much weakened state. It fell under the purview of the Ministry of Defence, which made it difficult for the United Nations and World Bank to engage with the organization. In 1997, the European Union decided to support the CPO, funding training and providing equipment and vehicles for 12 mine clearance teams and nine bomb disposal teams. In the urgency to get things moving in Bosnia, little thought went into project



Diana, Princess of Wales, at the Bosnian Mine Action Centre.

Photo courtesy of J.J. Van der Merwe.

sustainability. In early 1998, the CPO could not afford to take on the teams who were trained. As a result, hundreds of deminers were laid off, and equipment sat idle while waiting for more funds from the European Union.

Frustrated at the slow pace of house clearance in Bosnia, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) decided to fund its own clearance teams. In 1997, UNHCR trained and equipped a total of 240 deminers. These teams worked on house and apartment clearance in the two entities, but it was agreed that the project would come under the overall umbrella of the national program.

Finally, under the Dayton Peace Accords, the respective armies of the two entities were required to undertake mine clearance work. Under the supervision of the international military contingents from SFOR, if the entity armies undertook certain tasks like mine clearance, they earned credits, which allowed them access to funding, new weapons, or certain training opportunities. The entity armies had previously undertaken what they called “mine lifting” tasks, which involved using a minefield map to remove only the mines that were marked on the map. Sadly, as the work was undertaken by recently conscripted troops who did not check for any additional mines outside the mine lanes that may have been laid subsequently, there were a high number of injuries and deaths. No central records were kept of this work, and no one was confident that the areas involved were completely cleared. While the entity armies certainly had the potential to speed up the national mine clearance effort, this seemed to be a wasted endeavor.

Transition Process

Although the Commission for Demining was notionally the government authority in charge of all mine action, it only had varying influence over the seven different groups or projects outlined. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the government was weak, and a range of significant mine clearance activities were already underway without any coherent national plan in place. At the coordination level, there were only a few Bosnians in the BHMIC who had been identified as suitable to take over management roles.

The demining commissioners said they did not think that the government could meet the 1 July 1998 deadline for the transition of the mine action program from United Nations to government control. In many ways, the government was not ready; however, it had to be done. At the next Commission for Demining meeting in May 1998, UNDP announced that the handover would take place as planned on 1 July 1998, without the possibility for an extension.

To assist with the handover, the ‘Bosnia and Herzegovina – National Mine Action Plan – 1998’ was developed with the cooperation of the World Bank and European Union. The program aimed to reduce the number of civilian landmine and UXO casualties, clear houses for returning refugees and internally displaced persons, and make land safe for agriculture, reconstruction, and development activities. The key elements of the plan detailed the transition to government control and outlined what the U.N. components would do. The amount of confirmed or pledged funding came to US\$18 million total for 1998. With another \$22 million requested, this total amounted to US\$40 million for the year. Deminers’ salary costs were one of the main reasons for the large figures. In Afghanistan and Laos, deminers were paid US\$100 per month. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, because of the European cost of living, the rate was around US\$800 per month.

As the Dayton Peace Accords attracted significant international attention, many high-level visitors came to see the mine clearance work in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The most famous visitor was Diana, Princess of Wales, who visited the U.N. Mine Action Centre in Sarajevo in early August 1997, just weeks before her death. Other notable visitors at the time included Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, Japanese Foreign Minister Keizo Obuchi, and the head of UNHCR, Mrs. Sadako Ogata.

Preparing for the Handover

In preparation for the handover of responsibility, a two-day workshop was arranged at the Marshall Tito Barracks from 11 to 12 June 1998. Over 100 demining supervisors from a variety of organizations from the two entities attended. Getting people into Sarajevo from all over the country involved detailed logistical planning, and U.N. vehicles were dispatched to ensure safe passage for many attendees.

The meeting went extremely well. The participants, many of whom were former combatants who had probably fought against each other, discussed technical issues cordially. Despite political tension amongst participants, the meeting was a success overall and helped clarify the national program’s way forward. Because of its technical nature and obvious benefits to

communities, the mine action sector showed that it could be part of the peace-building efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The use of the Bosnian entity armies in mine clearance was another issue that needed to be addressed. These armies were a huge, under-utilized resource with the capacity to provide future clearance. The military had previously resisted taking tasking orders from a civilian body or having their work inspected by civilians. As the team leaders' meeting involved some personnel from the entity armies, they left with a better understanding of the national program. Following subsequent meetings with entity armies, SFOR representatives, and donors, significant agreements were reached.

The international military contingents from SFOR agreed to train and equip the entity army deminers according to the new international standards, and the United States announced that they would set up three training centers. The entity armies agreed to accept clearance tasks from BHMIC and to allow civilian inspectors to accredit army units and check their work. Due to civilian sensitivities remaining from the militaries' actions during the war, the military would focus on clearing areas around military bases, airfields, and industrial sites, as opposed to clearing houses. The one sticking point was extra insurance to cover the army deminers, but Canada and Norway agreed to provide funds to cover these costs.

Local candidates were identified to head the new BHMIC, entity centers, and other key posts within the offices. However, quite a few positions would still have to be filled by U.N. staff, and there would be a reliance on donor funding for many years to come.

Transition Ceremony

On 1 July 1998, a day of ceremonies marked the handover, as the United Nations transitioned ownership of the BHMIC to the government, and the new Bosnian managers were sworn in. The entity armies were to sign agreements that fell under the umbrella of the national program, but at the last minute, some alleged inequality was raised that halted proceedings. The signature of these agreements eventually took place on 6 July 1998. The transition to national ownership of the mine action program was complete—at the political level at least. ©

See endnotes page 64

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Ian Mansfield has worked in mine action for the past 25 years. Between 1991 and 1998 he was the United Nations program manager in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Laos. Mansfield then worked as the UNDP mine action team leader in New York for four years, followed by nine years as the Deputy Director of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD). He now works as a consultant based from his home in Australia and recently published *Stepping into a Minefield* about his experiences in the early days of mine action.

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