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Bosnia and Herzegovina: ITF Enhancing Human Security Perspective 20 Years After the Conflict

by Gregor Sančanin [ITF Enhancing Human Security]



A deminer and mine detection dog enter a minefield above the town of Konjic.
All photos courtesy of ITF Enhancing Human Security.

ITF Enhancing Human Security has worked in Southeast Europe's post-conflict countries since 1998. In states affected by the break-up of Yugoslavia such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, ITF works to support the country's fulfillment of the *Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention* (APMBC).¹

With a history of nationalistic antagonisms, a series of armed conflicts, secessions, and major political and state structural reforms stemming back to the turn of the 20th century, the history of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) is intertwined with the history of religious and ethnic groups in that area.

By the early 1990s, rising ethnic tensions led to an outbreak of armed clashes as the Yugoslav republics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia seceded from the SFRY. Today, some of the former SFRY republics are still contaminated with high concentrations of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), Bosnia and Herzegovina being the most heavily affected in the region.²

Historical Context

Bosnia and Herzegovina's declaration of sovereignty in October 1991 was followed by a referendum for independence



A deminer checks the soil for a potential mine in the ground in Konjic municipality.

from the former SFRY in February 1992.³ Three and a half years after the ethnic- and religious-based armed conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina began in April 1992, a peace agreement was reached on 21 November 1995 in Dayton, Ohio, and officially signed in Paris, France, on 15 December 1995, bringing years of interethnic civil strife to an end.⁴ The Dayton Peace Accords retained Bosnia and Herzegovina's international boundaries and created a joint, multi-ethnic and democratic government, the state itself being composed of two largely autonomous constitutional and legal entities.^{5,6}

Mine action in Bosnia and Herzegovina began in 1996, with the establishment of the United Nations Mine Action Centre (UNMAC), created for the purpose of building a local management structure and operational mine action capacity. All available minefield records were gathered through SFOR, and a central minefield database was established as a basic tool for further planning.⁷ During the initial years, demining operational activities were conducted mainly through U.N. and World Bank programs, with the engagement of a variety of international commercial and nongovernment organizations (NGO).

Bosnia and Herzegovina signed the APMBC on 3 December 1997 and ratified it on 8 September 1998. In July 1998, national structures took over more responsibility for demining activities, but still with continued financial, expertise, and technical assistance from the international community.

At the time two mine action entities were established, namely the Republic of Srpska Mine Action Centre (RSMAC) and the Federation Mine Action Centre (FMAC), as well as the joint coordination center: Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Center (BHMIC). The APMBC came into force on 1 March 1999 with obligations on Bosnia and Herzegovina to clear all known mined areas by March 2009.

In 2002, the central structure was established at the state level, and the BHMIC—until then only a coordination body—was authorized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Foreign agencies initially implemented humanitarian demining activities, but the process of building local capacities was underway. At that time, the main responsibility and authority was that of the Council of Ministers and both entity governments, which ensured coordination, improvement, planning, and recording of mine action programs.

The Demining Commission and Ministry of Civil Affairs prepared the first demining law in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was adopted by parliament in February 2002.⁸ The adoption of the law helped to make demining a priority in the country.⁹ In the same year, the first Mine Action Strategy was made for the period of 2002 to 2009, significantly improving the functionality of the structure, quality assurance, and the effectiveness of the overall process. At the end of 2004, an evaluation of the program concluded that the vision of the first strategy was too optimistic and the size and complexity of the



The view over a minefield during a presentation in Konjic.

problem greatly exceeded available funding, technology, and general support to implement the program. The adoption of a revised Mine Action Strategy for the period of 2005 to 2009 introduced a more realistic approach. At the same time, the Council of Ministers made a decision to start the preparation of a new strategic document for the period of 2009 to 2019, which would provide the basis for an extension of Bosnia and Herzegovina's APMBBC clearance deadline.

Previous experience indicates a significant discrepancy between needs for mine action in Bosnia and Herzegovina and realistic funding and technical possibilities. The Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Strategy 2009–2019 was adopted by the State Ministry Council on 24 April 2008.¹⁰ Nevertheless,



A deminer digs the soil in search of mines amidst the steep forest area in Doboju municipality.

considering the extent of the mine and UXO contamination, the available funding for its resolution, and the slow pace of clearance activities, it is clear that a new amended demining strategy with a new deadline beyond 2019 will need to be adopted in the near future.

Contamination

The presence of mines and UXO in Bosnia and Herzegovina will continue to be a priority for years to come. Threatening the physical safety of its residents, this contamination is an obstacle for country reconstruction, economic development, social society building, and the overall human security environment. Demining is an initial precondition for reconstruction and development projects, their successful implementation, and for the safe return of refugees and displaced persons.

Commercial companies, NGOs, the Bosnia and Herzegovina Armed Forces demining battalion, and entities' Civil Protection demining teams are the four officially recognized categories of operators directly involved in the mine clearance process in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Demining Commission requires that all demining agents be accredited by BHMBC prior to receiving approval to work in the country. In 2016, BHMBC accredited 27 operators to conduct humanitarian demining operations and monitoring in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the majority of which are national and locally-based organizations.¹¹

The initial estimation after the survey executed in 1996 indicated the mine and UXO suspected land-surface area was around 4,200 sq km (1,622 sq mi), presumably containing



up to approximately 1 million mines and UXO.¹² Currently, there is 1,118 sq km (442 sq mi) of suspected hazardous areas, which accounts for 2.2 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's total land area.¹³ Based on BHM MAC systematic survey operations, it is estimated that 81,000 mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) are spread throughout 9,018 locations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of the suspected hazardous areas, 7.3 sq km (2.8 sq mi) spread over approximately 200 locations is believed to contain approximately 2,000 cluster submunitions.¹⁴ Lives and livelihoods of an estimated 545,600 local residents are still directly affected by mines, UXO, and cluster munitions, while 1,398 communities in 129 towns and municipalities are identified and defined as impacted.^{15,16} Since 1996, there have been 1,742 mine/UXO victims, including 608 fatalities.¹⁷ Thus far, approximately 61,440 anti-personnel mines, 8,380 anti-tank mines, and 54,930 UXO were found and removed in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁸

Based on assessment of the residual mine problem, the general impact of landmines has been significantly reduced, and as much as realistically possible, in accordance with strategic goals, financial, operational, and resource planning. However, the May 2014 floods caused additional setbacks, complicating implementation plans for 2014 and halting prospective strategy planning for the future.

Floods of 2014

The May 2014 floods were the worst in the last 120 years, causing massive damage in the northern, eastern, and central parts of the country that border Croatia and Serbia. Meanwhile, Bosnia and Herzegovina was still recovering

from consequences of the 1992–1995 armed clashes, where much of the population continued to suffer from poverty and unemployment. The natural disaster affected 25-to-33 percent of the state territory and approximately one million people, with severe damage to urban, industrial, and rural areas. Electricity and clean water were unavailable for days and, in some cases, weeks. Many houses, infrastructure, schools, hospitals, private facilities, and farms were completely destroyed. This caused a deterioration of public services, local economies, and agriculture activities.^{19,20}

Initial concerns were raised about massive mine displacement as an estimated 70 percent of the flooded area was in or around mine contaminated areas.^{21,22} Fortunately, the



A mine detection dog team operates in steep forest terrain in Doboj municipality.



A mine detection dog works in a forest situated in minefields in Šamac municipality.

final recovery needs assessment concluded that the original mine migration was relatively small compared to initial estimates. Unfortunately, the fencing and warning signs around many minefields were destroyed and urgently needed to be replaced to avoid additional casualties. Landslides caused further mine migration within suspected hazardous areas as well, which meant that mines and UXO in some cases became more deeply buried in the soil. For this reason, areas needed to be resurveyed, re-marked, remapped, and in some cases even re-cleared.²³ Local populations in the flooded areas needed to be constantly informed of the additional mine/UXO risk.

The initial estimation of the floods' affected area consisted of approximately 920 sq km (355.2 sq mi), which included more than 3,000 landslide locations, prompting a landmine awareness campaign to make the local population and relief workers aware of the dangers from mines and UXO that may have been unearthed or repositioned by water erosion and landslide subsidence. From the initial 920 sq km (355.2 sq mi) of flooded areas, approximately 300 sq km (115.8 sq mi) was further assessed to be potentially in mine affected areas.²⁴ BHMACH also identified that approximately 105 sq km (40.5 sq mi) of the flooded area could potentially contain mines and UXO that migrated from the suspected hazardous areas. Within that 105 sq km (40.5 sq mi), a total of 40 sq km (15 sq mi) was finally designated suspected hazardous areas.²⁵ The 2014 floods therefore additionally burdened and delayed the demining process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

ITF Support in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Established by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia in March 1998, the initial purpose of ITF was to assist Bosnia and Herzegovina in the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accords by providing assistance and support for post-conflict rehabilitation.^{26, 27}

By the end of 2016, more than 77 sq km (47 sq mi) of land in Bosnia and Herzegovina was demined through more than 2,444 ITF projects, removing over 20,830 mines and almost 18,000 items of UXO.^{28,29,30} ITF has also provided rehabilitation to 829 mine accident survivors, provided mine risk education (MRE) to over 180,000 children and adults, and secured socioeconomic support projects for over 5,000 mine accident survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Future Challenges

Bosnia and Herzegovina undergoes a steady, albeit slow demining progress. One must understand that Bosnia and Herzegovina has highly complex political and decision-making systems. Demining is of crucial importance for all spheres of daily life as well as the national development strategy. Hence, the realpolitik should unanimously define national needs, ensuring a better future for coming generations. ©

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