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The ITF's Role in Demining Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro

by Gregor Sančanin [International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance]

The International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance has been offering its services to Southeast Europe's most war-affected countries since 1998. In states affected by the break-up of Yugoslavia, such as Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, this involvement has been critical to fulfilling the Ottawa Convention's goals.

With a history of ethnic wars, secessions and major political reformations stemming back to the turn of the 20th century, the history of the former Yugoslavia is a long and convoluted one. Recognized as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 (later called the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), the country had become known as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia by 1963. The SFRY was a communist state made up of the republics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia, as well as the autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina.

By the early 1990s, however, ethnic tensions dissolved into war as Croatia, Slovenia, the Republic of Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina seceded from the SFRY, leaving Serbia and Montenegro to form the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992. After more than a decade of fighting, all six former republics have become independent states, albeit with some of the heaviest concentrations of landmines and unexploded ordnance in the world.

Demining Serbia, 2003–2009

During the 1990s armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the Serbian Armed Forces¹ emplaced most of the landmines along border areas in present-day Serbia's Šid municipality. One of these affected areas, located within the Morović village community, shares a border with Croatia. The other, located within the Jamena village community, is positioned where the three borders of Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina meet. Although there were no military operations in this area, the minefields were placed for preventive purposes during the Yugoslav wars in 1991.

The northern region of Serbia contains forests that are centuries old, and the area is well known for its fertile soil and high-quality wood. Consequently, the landmines have obstructed the agricultural development of the area. With approximately 40,000 people living in the Šid municipality, including 2,300 residents in Morović village and 1,300 in Jamena village, these landmines have also obstructed the free movement of the population and reduced



Most anti-personnel mines were found during the implementation of the projects in Serbia.

All photos courtesy of ITF photo archive

the effectiveness of border police activities.

Commencement of mine action. In accordance with the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims

Assistance mandate, a mine-action unit from INTERSOS, an Italian nongovernmental organization committed to assisting the victims of natural disasters and armed conflicts, carried out an assessment of the landmine/unexploded ordnance problem in FRY in 2001. The assessment was based on collaboration with national counterparts including the FRY Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia and the FRY Federal Ministry of Defence.



Deminer at work in the forest area during winter.

While INTERSOS and the Mine Action Centre of Serbia conducted an initial estimation that approximated 6.5 square kilometers (2.5 square miles) of affected area, the survey showed that more than 28 square kilometers (10.8 square miles) of surface were contaminated with both mines and UXO. Through the course of demining at a later stage, the MACS conducted re-surveys of all mine-suspected areas, discovering a reduction of 0.8 sq km (0.31 mile) and a remaining 5.7 square kilometers (2.2 square miles).

Support of national capacities. The MACS was founded in 2002 as an organizational unit of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs after a suggestion by ITF to the government of Serbia. In 2003, the MACS was transferred from the FRY to Serbian authority. ITF supported and continues to support MACS extensively with equipment, vehicles, training and administrative assistance. In turn, the MACS was and is responsible for prioritizing demining areas, preparing projects, coordinating and monitoring mine-action activities and accrediting mine-action implementing

agencies.

Clearance Activities. The government of Serbia ratified the Ottawa Convention on 18 September 2003 (entered into force 1 March 2004). This committed Serbia to destroy all anti-personnel mines stockpiles by 2007 and to clear all mine-contaminated areas by 2014. Destroying the AP stockpiles in May 2007 was the benchmark for planning clearance activities in Serbia.

The first demining activities in Serbia commenced in the fall of 2003 in the border region with Croatia. The clearance of this area was completed in November 2009. In total, 44 mine-clearance projects were executed in Serbia (43 through ITF), successfully clearing more than 5.7 square kilometers (2.2 square miles) of land and removing 4,464 mines and 646 pieces of UXO.

Donors. The ITF raised more than US\$12.25 million for activities in Serbia including battle-area/cluster clearance, training, equipment and structural support to national capacities. ITF used \$8.4 million of this money for mine-clearance activities alone. The biggest donors were the Federal Republic of Germany (more than \$3 million), the United States (\$2.6 million) and Spain (more than \$1.1 million). In descending order of contributions, other important donors were the Czech Republic, the European Union, Canada, Norway and Slovenia.

Operational Partners. In Serbia, ITF applied a competitive tendering system to decide the clearance entities, according to international standards. Through this transparent and competitive system, ITF selected the implementing clearance organizations and companies, thereby ensuring the cost-effectiveness of demining operations. Over the past seven years, the following organizations and companies have been working in mine clearance in Serbia: BH Demining (Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina), Detektor (Republika Srpska), Dok-ing (Croatia), Enigma (Croatia), Help (Germany), Medecom (Republika Srpska) Norwegian People's Aid (Norway), PMC Engineering (Serbia), Roehll (Germany), Stop Mines (Republic of Srpska), UXB Balkans (USA), and Vilakol (Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina).

In addition to the involvement of donors, MACS, demining organizations and the ITF, an important part of the process was having independent monitoring companies (Eksploring, Minemon, Terra Prom, Trotil) perform monitoring, as well as quality control and quality assurance. ITF engaged these independent monitoring organizations to ensure high standards and safe operations, which resulted in there being no mine accidents throughout the clearance period.

Post-clearance evaluation. The impact of minefield clearance in Serbia was immediate. MACS declared the agricultural land and forests of all affected areas to be mine-free and handed them over to the local population for immediate use. Clearance of the contaminated areas unlocked great socioeconomic potential for the region and its residents, as the mined land had been unavailable to the residents for more than 15 years.

Completion and future plans. On 21 December 2009, the government of Serbia held a celebration of the successful



Anti-tank mines were found near anti-personnel mines.

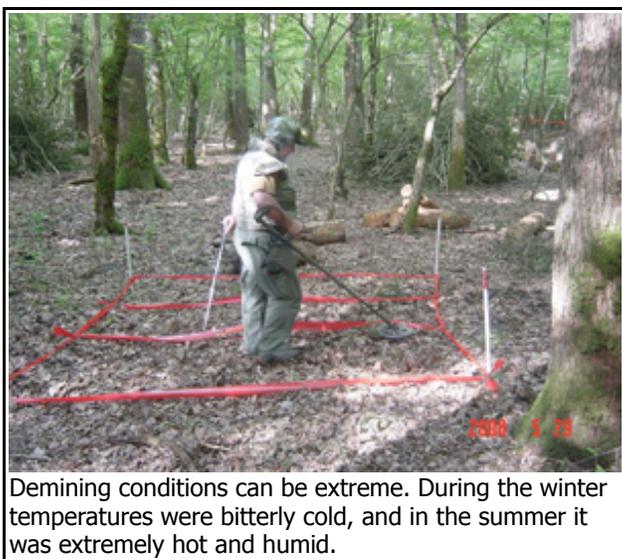
completion of demining programs in Morović. The ITF, MACS and U.S. Embassy representatives gave presentations on the demining results, and Mr. Ivica Dačić, the Minister of Interior of the Republic of Serbia, confirmed the commitment of the government of Serbia to continue with activities of cluster clearance, stockpile reduction, and small arms and light weapons destruction in a speech delivered at the event. ITF will now fully focus on cluster clearance in Serbia for the next three to five years, thereby capitalizing upon the battle-area clearance activities it has been running in the Niš and Kraljevo municipalities and in Kopaonik national park since 2003 and reaffirming its goal to make Southeastern Europe free from the effects of landmines and unexploded ordnance.

Demining Macedonia, 2001–2009

After the Kosovo conflict in 1999, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians also took refuge in Macedonia. Shortly thereafter, many of these individuals began seeking independence for the Albanian dominated portions of Macedonia. As a result, the National Liberation Army was formed. By 2001, the conflict had escalated into a full-scale war, with the NLA and the government of Macedonia fighting for control of territory. This conflict, in addition to World War I and WWII, had left the area covered in landmines and ERW.

The government of Macedonia ratified the Ottawa Convention on 9 September 1998 (entered into force 1 March 1999), thereby committing to destroy all stockpiles of anti-personnel mines by March 2003 and clear all mine-contaminated areas by March

2009.



Demining conditions can be extreme. During the winter temperatures were bitterly cold, and in the summer it was extremely hot and humid.

Commencement of Mine Action. ITF has been supporting the Macedonian mine-action program since September 2001, when the first Administrative Agreement between ITF and Macedonia was signed. ITF then opened a temporary implementation office in Skopje to coordinate and oversee implementation of demining and BAC operations during the period from 2001–2003. In addition to supporting mine clearance and BAC operations, ITF also provided further support through capacity building, rehabilitation of mine victims in a Slovenian rehabilitation institute, a “train and equip” program, and rehabilitation training programs.

All together, ITF implemented 59 demining/BAC projects from September 2001 to September 2006, and contributed \$2.1 million in support of the Macedonian mine-action program from 2001–2009 through international donations from Denmark, the European Agency for Reconstruction in Skopje, France, Norway, Slovenia, the United Kingdom and the United States. With international and national teams—such as the Civil Protection and Rescue Directorate—executing clearance operations, these actions led to the destruction of 22 mines and 762 pieces of UXO, as well

as the release of close to 4.5 square kilometers (1.7 square miles) of land.

Results. According to the *Landmine Monitor Report*,² Macedonia had searched and cleared a total of nearly 7 square kilometers (2.7 square miles) of land by 2009, particularly on the northwestern border, where clearance teams destroyed 558 AP mines. These efforts, when combined with the destruction of stockpiled AP mines in February 2003, allowed Macedonia to fulfill its Ottawa Convention commitments on 15 September 2006.

With this success in mind, Macedonia intends to tackle the presence of explosive remnants of war from WWI and WWII, which requires a permanent national demining capacity. ITF will also strive to successfully complete the project

"Establishing Macedonian Underwater UXO Capacity and Clearance of Lake Ohrid," which will require a financial commitment from the Macedonian government.

Demining Montenegro, 2002–2007

Most of Montenegro's landmine contamination comes from the break-up of the SFRY. Though Serbia and Montenegro had begun destroying their collective stockpile of landmines in 2005, Montenegro's official secession in 2006 had complicated the process, as the new state was still in the process of finalizing its laws.

The government of Montenegro ratified the Ottawa Convention on 23 October 2006 (entered into force 1 April 2007), thereby committing to destroy all stockpiled AP mines by April 2011 and to clear all mine-contaminated areas by April 2017. On 16 May 2007 the first of these goals was achieved when the last of Montenegro's stockpiled mines were destroyed in Serbia. The government had further decided not to retain any mines for training purposes. Following its independence from the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in November 2007, Montenegro was reported as having completed mine-clearance operations. However, no formal declaration of compliance with Article 5 has been made by the government of Montenegro.

Commencement of mine action. The government of Montenegro founded the Regional Center for Underwater Demining as a national and regional institution in June 2002, assigning it to the Ministry of Interior Affairs. ITF and the South-Eastern Europe Mine Action Coordination Council³ have strongly supported the initiative for creating the RCUD in Montenegro and assigning it as the national mine-action authority and regional underwater demining training center in Montenegro. Both ITF and SEEMAC recognize the important geographical position of Montenegro in the Mediterranean, and the importance of enhancing the professional qualifications of the Montenegro divers.

ITF's Role. ITF mine-action activities in Montenegro started in 2002. Amphibia, UXB Balkans, Akcija Protiv Mina and Provita performed clearance projects involving demining, BAC and Technical Survey from 2003 to 2007, with projects taking place on the borders with Croatia and Albania. In total, these projects released 718,625 square meters (178 acres) of land with 95 mines and 34 UXO removed and destroyed. In addition to land clearance, one project of underwater clearance was executed in the Verige Strait of Kotor bay, clearing 2.5 square meters (27 square feet) of sea bottom and removing 1,423 pieces of UXO. ITF thus fulfilled its strategic goal of making Montenegro free of landmines by the end of 2007.

ITF projects also included support for general surveys, the execution of three trainings for underwater deminers from the SEE region, renovation of RCUD headquarters in Bijela, the purchase of a computer and Geographical Information System equipment, a boat, transportation vehicles and diving equipment, as well as the adaptation of training vessels and the purchase of sonar equipment.

In total, ITF spent \$1.6 million in donations from the United States and the Republic of Slovenia and the United States for clearance operations from 2002–2009. Unfortunately, despite the success of clearance missions, Montenegro continues to face contamination from unexploded submunitions and underwater ERW located off-shore.

Conclusion

ITF's successes in Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro serve to highlight the importance of a collaborative multi-national approach to demining. Despite the history of war and ethnic rivalry within SEE states, the impact of landmines, ERW and UXO often crosses political and socioeconomic lines, thereby contributing to the destabilization of an entire region. Ultimately, it is essential that countries recognize the national, regional, and international approaches to establishing security and stability through demining.

To this end, ITF vows to continue its work in SEE, coordinating mine-action activities, mine victims' assistance and mine-risk education projects with respect to national and regional goals. 📌

Biography

Gregor Sančanin has worked as a Project Manager for Albania, Montenegro and Serbia/Kosovo at the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance since 2003. He received a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Ljubljana-Slovenia and is currently pursuing a master's degree in social sciences-politology from the same university. Prior to his involvement in mine action, Sančanin worked for seven years in media/television broadcasting in Slovenia.



Endnotes

1. After the breakup of SFR Yugoslavia, FRY was formed by two remaining republics still in federation—Serbia and Montenegro. The remains of Yugoslav People's Army (*Jugoslovenska narodna armija*) was renamed Army of Yugoslavia (*Vojska Jugoslavije*). In 2003, it was renamed the Army of Serbia and Montenegro. In 2006, after the breakup of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, it was named the Serbian Armed Forces.
2. "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia." *Landmine Monitor Report 2009*. New York: International Campaign to Ban Landmines. http://www.the-monitor.org/index.php/publications/display?act=submit&pgs_year=2009&pgs_type=lm&pgs_report=macedonia&pgs_section=.
3. SEEMAC was founded by ITF in 2000 to promote fundraising, demining activities, and the exchange of information for demining programs in SEE. The organization currently consists of members including the Albanian Mine Action Executive, the Azerbaijan National Agency for Mine Action, the Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Centre, the Croatian Mine Action Center, ITF, and the Regional Center for Underwater Demining, among many others.

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