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Bosnia and Herzegovina

by Katie FitzGerald [Mine Action Information Center]

Shortly after Bosnia and Herzegovina's¹ declaration of independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in March 1992, the country broke into conflict that lasted three years. A peace agreement ended the conflict in 1995, but the country had already become littered with landmines and unexploded ordnance. Today BiH is the most mine-affected country in Europe, with an estimated 1.3 million people, roughly one third of the population, living in 1,366 mine-impacted communities.² The latest government statistics disclose that there are more than 12,000 locations requiring clearance.³ The country's goal of being mine-free⁴ by 2009 set by the National Mine Action Strategy will require a great deal of time and cooperation, but steps are being taken to give the citizens of BiH a safe place to live.

Mine Situation in BiH

The Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Centre reports that from May 2002 to May 2006, there were 187 mine-related incidents. In total almost 5,000 people have been killed or injured by mines, including 1,520 since the end of the war.² In 2006 the number of mine victims significantly increased in comparison to previous years, according to Svjetlana Trifkovic, the Public Relations Officer for BHMAC. In 2005 there were 19 mine victims, compared to 34 victims in 2006 (17 killed, 17 injured).⁴ The BHMAC has also recorded more than 18,000 minefields and believes that 670,000 landmines and 650,000 UXO items contaminate more than 2,000 square kilometers (772 square miles) of land.⁵

Handicap International conducted a 2002–2003 Landmine Impact Survey⁶ with funding from the United States, Canada and the European Commission.⁷ The survey revealed minefields and UXO affected 1,366 of 2,935 communities to some degree and enhanced BHMAC's ability to develop effective mine-action plans.

Mine/UXO Clearance

Nongovernmental organizations (such as Norwegian People's Aid), the Bosnian Armed Forces, and civil protection and commercial companies carry out mine clearance and Technical Survey in the country. In 2005, 4,009,051 square meters (991 acres) of land were cleared of mines while in the first six months of 2006, 848,763 square meters (210 acres) were cleared.³ In accordance with NATO's Partnership for Peace Trust

Fund, the South Eastern Europe Initiative Trust Fund was launched to support the defense reform efforts of BiH in June 2006. The SEEI Trust Fund is designed to provide transition assistance to military and civilian personnel made redundant by the ongoing transformation of the Armed Forces of BiH into a NATO-compatible single military force.⁸

While there is an obvious commitment by all mine-action players in BiH to mine clearance, the main obstacle for BiH's mine-action plan is funding. According to the Electronic Mine Information Network, "In terms of government institutions addressing mine action (namely, the Bosnian Armed Forces and civil-protection authorities), limited funding has caused difficulties in procuring demining equipment and introducing new demining techniques. Nongovernmental organizations and demining companies also struggle with funding challenges."³ In 2007, mine clearance in BiH will cost a projected US\$2,469,356.³

Mine-risk Education

MRE is one of the largest BiH mine-action activities. BHMAC estimated over 100,000 people received MRE in 2005 through the activities of organizations such as Genesis, Spirit of Soccer and the Red Cross Society BiH.

Genesis. Genesis devotes its efforts to providing interactive education through live puppet shows representing diverse educational topics such as ecology, environmental protection, mine-risk education, children rights and prevention of diseases of addiction.⁹ Genesis has provided school-based MRE since 1996, and 6,497 children have benefited from the MRE puppet shows so far. Genesis, with the support of UNICEF, has produced and broadcast 15 educational TV shows for children and adolescents since 2001.¹⁰

Spirit of Soccer. The British NGO Spirit of Soccer provided MRE to over 7,500 children through its sport-related activities and during 2006 distributed nearly 10,000 posters featuring world famous soccer stars endorsing MRE messages in BiH. "I feel that the project we implemented in BiH has proved to be a solid method of promoting MRE to at-risk children through the medium of soccer and other sporting activities," says Spirit of Soccer Director Scotty Lee.¹¹ In 2005, 6,259 children in 57 sporting clubs received MRE messages through soccer clubs and summer youth camps.

Red Cross Society of BiH. The Red Cross Society BiH's goal is to reduce death and injuries caused by mines and other unexploded ordnance,¹² and the organization is one of the key players in MRE in BiH. It planned to produce seven MRE plans and implement two of them in impacted communities in 2006; no update was available at the time of printing. Their main focus has changed from school-based MRE to working in the community, especially with adult males.

The Future

The United Nations Assembly declared the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action on 4 April 2006, and the second annual observance of the day was marked in Bosnia and Herzegovina where local authorities and international organizations analyzed past achievements in the area of mine action and "reiterated their commitment and willingness to solve the issue of the presence of landmines and the danger they represent in the country as soon as possible."¹³ The United Nations in BiH, along with the global mine-action community, wanted to draw more attention to the problem of landmines and explosive remnants of war in this area to emphasize their commitment to strengthening their response.²

The goal of Mine Action Day is to recognize the importance of mine action in the country and to continue taking action. The vision behind creating an annual Mine Action Day is to one day see people living in a community that is safe and mine-free.

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