

Croatia

by Adam Gosney [Mine Action Information Center]

On 25 June 1991, Croatia became an independent nation. Serbian and Yugoslav forces soon invaded the country, with the area known as Slavonia being a major battleground changing hands frequently throughout the conflict. The Dayton Peace Accords in November 1995 ended the fighting and Slavonia returned to Croatia on 15 January 1998. In 2003 Croatia applied for European Union membership and in 2004 received official candidate status. Prime Minister Ivo Sanader stated that 2007 is a critical year if Croatia wishes to become an EU member. While not directly included in these discussions, Croatia's substantial mine-affected areas are seen as a humanitarian concern.

Mine/ERW' Problem

The primary focus of mine action in Croatia centers upon agricultural land and areas near population centers, while most of the unexploded ordnance from the war resides within mountainous and high-wilderness areas. Since 1991, over 1,880 victims have suffered as a result of explosive remnants of war. Between 1998 and 2007 the number of ERW-related victims was 273, with 101 being killed. As of 2004, 14 of 21 counties were believed to contain contaminated areas equaling 1,174 square kilometers (453 square miles). By the end of 2006, mine-suspected areas had decreased to 12 counties, covering an area of 1,044 square kilometers (403 square miles). Within that area, 250 square kilometers (112 square miles) are "high priority" and include agricultural areas, houses and yards, infrastructure, meadows, and pastures.²

Croatia signed the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention³ on 4 December 1997 and became a State Party in 1999. It completed the destruction of its anti-personnel mine stockpile in October 2002. During November–December 2005 and for most of 2006, Croatia served as president of the Sixth Meeting of States Parties to the Ottawa Convention. While serving as the 6MSP president, Croatia focused on the need to be strict in regards to all ERW.⁴

Clearance

In February 1998 the government of the Republic of Croatia established the Croatian Mine Action Center to manage and coordinate mine-action activities in Croatia. Several organizations are involved in mine action in Croatia. Some of these groups include Adopt-A-Minefield, the International

Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance, Norwegian People's Aid, the Croatian Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Bembo Association, and many others. AAM raised US\$4 million dollars in 2006 and is beginning to work in mine-risk education as well.⁵ In Croatia, 28 commercial mine-clearance companies and the NPA utilize 583 deminers, 45 demining machines and 103 mine-detection dogs to perform demining.

According to Kristina Iki Bani ek of CROMAC, the country's target goal to remove all known minefields by March 2009 depends upon funds available for mine clearance.² During 2006 a total of 25 square kilometers (10 square miles) was cleared and 78 square kilometers (30 square miles) were released through survey. Items destroyed included 1,514 anti-personnel mines, 1,184 anti-vehicle mines and 5,409 items of unexploded ordnance. These efforts led to a decrease of 103 square kilometers (40 square miles) of mine-suspected area in Croatia.

A majority of MSAs are located in wooded, mountainous areas. More tourists are visiting these remote areas for hiking and camping, so their importance has increased. Bani ek explains, "If some mountain area has some significance in relation to nature preservation, protection of plants and animal species or even just as a fire-prevention line or forest-exploitation line, then [CROMAC has] no problem convincing the funding party that it is a good project" worthy of their funding.²

Mine-risk Education

The Croatian Red Cross in Vinkovci performed a theatrical show called "Mines are an Invisible Killer" for 100 children in early 2006. The CRC program "Playgrounds Without Mines," has installed over 40 playgrounds in 14 counties since 2001. Using funds from donors, the CRC assists local communities in building playgrounds so children will not play in mine-suspected areas.⁶ The CRC and CROMAC also visit schools and inform children and their parents about ERW.

Since 2002, Norwegian People's Aid and the Bembo Association have used Croatian celebrities in their play, "Bembo and Friends Against Mines," to educate young children about ERW. In 2005, NPA, CMVA and the Bembo Association organized 10 MRE plays in seven municipalities in NPA areas of operation for 3,000 people (two-thirds were

children). During April and May 2006, NPA and the Bembo Association organized 16 more shows in elementary schools, which were widely publicized through mass-media coverage; over 2,000 children and 20 teachers attended.⁷

Conclusion

Croatia has made significant gains in mine action. With such CROMAC projects as the Geo Information Project database and the Scan Center,⁸ Croatia is developing and using technology to identify MSAs at a rate never seen before. Several factors depend on 100-percent removal becoming a reality, but CROMAC is optimistic that with this amount of MSA cleared over the past nine years, Croatia is on its way to becoming completely mine-free.

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