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Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

by Rachel Canfield [Mine Action Information Center]

Ten years after gaining independence, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia faced the uprising of an armed group of ethnic Albanians demanding greater civil rights.¹ The hostility between the ethnic Albanians—who called themselves the National Liberation Army—and the Macedonian government lasted seven months and ended with the signing of the Framework Agreement in August 2001.² This conflict, in addition to World Wars I and II, left Macedonia with contamination from landmines and other explosive remnants of war³ along the northern borders with Kosovo and Albania and the southern border with Greece. In September 2006, five years after the end of the internal conflict, Macedonia completed landmine clearance² and continues to work towards clearance of other ERW.

Landmine/Unexploded Ordnance Contamination

After the fighting between the NLA and Macedonian government forces ended, the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre and the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Awareness conducted surveys to assess the ERW threat.⁴ The northern region of the country, specifically the northwestern borders with Kosovo and Albania, was found to be rife with landmines.

While landmines posed a serious threat, the surveys established that “the greater threat ‘by far’ came from UXO.”⁴ According to government authorities, mines and UXO from the conflict contaminated 80 villages, including the regions of Kumanovo, Tetovo and Skopje.¹ During the conflict, 70,000 people fled their homes, and mine contamination hindered their safe return.

In November 2002 the United Nations Mine Action Office assessed the UXO problem in the southern region of the country caused by World Wars I and II. The Thessalonica Front, the 250-kilometer (155-mile) border with Greece, was found to be contaminated in the areas of Gevgelija, Kavardaci and Bitola.⁴

Macedonia’s landmine threat was considered “localized and easily defined” because the NLA laid mines specifically in areas that led to their defensive locations.⁴ The threat was limited to certain areas where minefield locations were identified. However, this knowledge does not extend to

the UXO threat. ERW have still prevented the use of land while also affecting economic development, communication and tourism. An estimated 40 people have been killed and 1,043 injured by mines and UXO from 1965 to 2003.⁵

The Road to Clearance

Macedonia became a State Party to the Ottawa Convention⁶ 1 March 1999 and is a State Party to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.⁷ Macedonia completed stockpile clearance two and a half years before the Ottawa Convention-mandated deadline. In September 2006, four years after starting, Macedonia completed landmine clearance.² The Macedonian government set priorities for mine clearance, which began in 2002. Among the greatest concerns were areas that prevented internally displaced persons from returning home and Slupchane village, because a hospital was to be built there.

Organizations that participated in clearance of the region contaminated after the 2001 conflict were Handicap International, MineTech International (contracted by CARE International) and the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance.⁴ The U.S. Department of State also contributed to mine action in Macedonia through the ITF and by funding the deployment of six demining teams from Bosnia and Herzegovina.² By the end of 2004, 200,000 mines/UXO had been found and destroyed.⁵

A United Nations Mine Action Office was established in September 2001 after the UNMACC survey,⁴ and the Ministry of Defense took over in 2003. Shortly thereafter, the Protection and Rescue Directorate was formed, becoming the only body responsible for mine/UXO clearance in Macedonia. The Directorate began its work in 2005. The Directorate’s role in mine action involves surveys, clearance, mine destruction, marking and fencing minefields, and medical treatment of victims.⁵

Mine-risk Education

The 2001 conflict and resulting border contamination created a need for mine-risk education campaigns in the northern region of the country. The International Committee of the Red Cross led MRE efforts with help from the Macedonian Red Cross. MRE activities ranged from community-based

sessions to media campaigns and a traveling theater program. The International Committee of the Red Cross ended its MRE work in Macedonia in 2003. ICRC’s two years of activities along with UNICEF’s involvement in 2001 resulted in over 17,000 individuals being reached.⁸

The Road Ahead

The Directorate formulated an action plan in 2005. The plan details the period 2006 to 2010 and involves three phases:⁵

1. Developing national capacities and obtaining equipment. This phase has been completed.
2. Conducting surveys to establish future clearance priorities. This phase is set to take two years and should be completed by 2008.
3. Developing operationally and establishing international and national partnerships. This phase is a continuing process.

Although landmine clearance has been completed, UXO still pose a threat to the southern region of the country, and the Directorate will continue to carry out its action plan. This contamination is expected to be cleared by 2009

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