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A Squad of Their Own



All-woman demining team ready to enter the mine field.
Photo c/o NPA

by Margaret S. Busé

The first all-female demining team was deployed in Kosovo in late November 1999. Comprised of women refugees who had previously been housewives, they are the first all-female demining team in the world. In Kosovo's traditional patriarchal society, few women work outside the home and until now, no women worked in this internationally male dominated occupation. The sight of the women deminers, long hair peeking out of helmets, has raised a few eyebrows. As one elderly farmer remarked upon seeing them, "My poor dears, you are so beautiful."

The 68 women deminers were not making an

overt feminist statement by the occupation they had chosen. They were simply going to work. Many women have to assume the role of breadwinner because their husbands have been killed in the war. Thomas Jarnehed, Norwegian People's Aid demining program manager in Kosovo, said that he chose the female deminers because of their experience from the war. "When I set up the NPA demining program, I was determined to implement a policy of equality between the sexes. My objective is to have 50 percent males and females. It was a decision I took alone."

NPA is responsible for training and paying the deminers. Each woman attended a five-week training

course in Pec, Yugoslavia, where, through Scandinavian custom, they were able to bring their children. They receive a monthly salary of approximately \$423, which is considered good pay in a province where two-thirds of the workforce is unemployed. Women are currently out in the field, many commanding squads of their own. Demining has boosted the status and self-esteem of the women involved with this nerve-jarring occupation.

"You need a lot of patience with this work, where depending on the amount of vegetation, you may need all day to clear a six- to 16-foot lane," says Borge Hoknes, NPA's project manager. "In Scandinavia, we believe that it is important to show there are a lot more equalities than differences between men and women. Demining is one area where you can see that clearly." Equalities aside, Hoknes also mentioned that the patience and commitment of the women actually make them much better than men at clearing mines. He mentioned that women, in general, were better motivated, committed and displayed a more even temperament.

Initially, there were some tensions between male and the female deminers. A few men with unwavering opinions were removed from the demining teams. Sometimes, "men want to be rough and tough and this is no place for a Rambo," says Hoknes. "In this job you don't get a second chance. We look for individuals from stable backgrounds who are calm and patient and have a commitment to helping their people."

Though the women know the risks, most of them state they are not afraid. Nora Kelmendi, whose husband is also a deminer, says, "I'm not afraid. I'm

an optimistic person. I just have to be careful." She also adds that her husband is very proud of her, her bravery, and that she made the decisions to be a deminer on her own. A mother of two small children, Kelmendi says, "I heard of the children being killed by mines and I took the opportunity to do something. It is normal to be a bit scared, but we know if we fol-



The painstaking work of demining. A small area may be a day's work. The Serbs mined schools and playgrounds, and they booby-trapped toys lying on the ground.

Photo c/o NPA

low the rules there will be no problem. The men I meet congratulate me."

Valbona Berisha did not receive such emotional support. "When I told them at home what I am doing my brother shouted at me that I was sick and didn't know the meaning of the word danger. But my husband was killed by the Serbs. I am helping the people of Kosovo and most of all, I help the children."

"I thought I would do the training, then think it over again, but now it is in my blood," says Kelmendi. "People say to me, 'You're very cool, How come you are not afraid?' I don't have words to describe how good I feel about it. This is my contribution to Kosovo, to help clean up the mines."

The Serbs mined schools and playgrounds, and they booby-trapped toys lying on the ground. NPA has trained over 90 recruits for demining. Many experts in the field say that it will take years to clear the mines. Current priorities are homes, schools and agricultural land so those farmers may be able to till the ground in the spring. ■



A woman kneels in patience. Some men do not support women deminers.

Photo c/o NPA

Women Deminers in Kosovo

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