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The U.S. Humanitarian Demining Program in the Balkans

by Matt Murphy

As a result of years of conflict in the Balkans, countless landmines have been laid in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Bosnia-Herzegovina's landmine problem is severe, with an estimated 750,000 landmines and an undetermined quantity of unexploded ordnance infesting some 186 square miles of land. These hidden killers have killed and maimed hundreds, vastly impeded the return of refugees to their homes, and hindered international efforts to help people in the region.

Since 1996, the U.S. government has provided over \$40 million to remedy the problem and has joined with the government of Slovenia to support demining and mine action assistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The United States has also partnered with the Slovenian International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victim Assistance in the Balkans, which has proven to be one of the outstanding success stories in humanitarian demining assistance.

Although the U.S. humanitarian demining program in Bosnia-Herzegovina has reached the sustainment phase through the International Trust Fund (ITF), the United States will continue to support demining efforts there, as well as in other countries. U.S.-Bosnia-Herzegovina bilateral accomplishments include: the setting up of a U.N. Mine Action Center; the establishment of three regional demining centers; training and equipping three civilian demining forces, a total of 180 men and 27 mine-detection dogs; and setting up three military centers that have trained and equipped 1000 deminers and 70 instructors.

U.S. support of the ITF is an excellent example of regional and international cooperation and an ef-

fective mechanism for addressing the landmine problem throughout the Balkans. In Croatia, for example, the United States funded, through the ITF, six demining projects in communities that welcome the return of ethnic minority residents. These projects support U.S. and Croatian policies to re-establish a multi-ethnic society in Croatia.

The United States is also supporting the cleanup effort in Kosovo. Once that conflict ended, the United States worked with the United Nations and other countries and international donors, to implement an operation that provided mine-awareness education, mine-survey operations and mine-clearance support. Altogether, U.S. fiscal 1999 assistance for demining in Kosovo amounted to almost \$3 million.

Assuming other donor nations deposit funds into the ITF and the United States matches the funds, the United States plans to deploy similar demining teams in Albania and Macedonia to resolve landmine problems in those two countries.

Thanks to the initial U.S. funding assistance for humanitarian demining, the subsequent infusion of Slovenian International Trust Fund monies and the support of other international donors, mine-affected Balkan nations are making great progress toward the eventual elimination of their landmine challenges. ■

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There are an estimated 60–100 million landmines worldwide. People are displaced. Their homes are abandoned. Their fields lay fallow from the encroachment of mine fields. Food, water, wood and other necessities for subsistence are impossible to retrieve without mortal danger. These people need a helping hand and the U.S. Humanitarian Demining Program is one that reaches out to them.

The U.S. program seeks to relieve human suffering while promoting U.S. interests. In addition to demining, the program's objectives are to establish sustainable, indigenous demining programs, reduce civilian casualties, allow for the return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes, enhance a nation's stability and encourage international cooperation and participation.

Mine-affected countries usually make requests through the U.S. Embassy, who then reviews each situation and forwards its findings to the Interagency Working Group (IWG), which is chaired by the Department of State and vice-chaired by the Department of Defense. After determining the nature of the mine problem and the suitability of U.S. assistance, a formal program is established in coordination with the host nation's existing capacity for demining and helps to develop a program that is managed and executed by the host nation. Typically, the U.S. program involves assisting in the establishment of a mine action center, a mine-awareness program and a demining-training program. With the goal of creating a self-sustaining host nation, the United States periodically evaluates the program and passes off its active role to the host nation, although some U.S. funding may continue to aid demining efforts.

The Department of Defense is generally responsible for funding the training part of the program, while the Department of State assists the country in implementing the program and achieving a level of sustainment. Through the Department of Defense the U.S. military has been engaged in humanitarian demining since 1994, providing equipment to demining operations, training in mine awareness and clearance as well as the establishment of self-sustaining programs.

When a direct U.S. military bilateral program is inappropriate, the United States contributes to programs by the United Nations, non-governmental organizations or international organizations.

Since 1993, the United States has established humanitarian demining programs in 26 countries and expects to expand to several more in 2000. The United States supports the Cambodian Mine Action Center, whose work has reduced the death rate from landmines by 50 percent. In Namibia, deminers have been able to reduce the casualty rate by more than 90 percent and have restored most previously mined land to productive use.

In late 1997, secretaries Madeleine Albright and William Cohen announced the Demining 2010 Initiative to execute the president's directive that all landmines threatening civilians be eliminated by 2010. To meet this initiative, Albright established the Office of Global Humanitarian Demining, which is responsible for the developing and coordinating of a U.S.-led international campaign to increase global cooperation and resources. With the U.S. Government Humanitarian Demining Program being led by the departments of State and Defense, the United States is leading the international community in the new millennium of mine eradication. ■