

notes FROM the FIELD

A Diary of Destruction in: Bosnia



*Mosor, Bosnia and
Herzegovina.*

Photo c/o UNA/USA /
Oren Schlein

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During the Bosnian war in the early 1990s, Croat, Muslim and Serb forces deployed between 600,000 and 1 million anti-personnel landmines. This can seem a meaningless figure until you see the effects of both exploded and unexploded landmines. Driving into town from the Sarajevo airport, I witnessed the striking contrast between the beauty of the hills surrounding the city and the pockmarked buildings damaged by relentless shelling during the Bosnian war. The old town has been largely restored to its historical charm, while the rest of the city and outlying areas continue to exhibit the awful blemishes of war. I had come to Bosnia to meet with representatives from the local mine action centers, to discuss the progress of the Adopt-A-Minefield™ program in Bosnia, and to visit several mined areas.

After a day's orientation in Sarajevo, I headed north with my Bosnian driver to the city of Doboj, about 75 miles away. The trip took approximately two hours, through winding roads along the Bosna River. As we approached Doboj, we crossed the river, which skirts the southern edge of the city and which demarcated the confrontation line during the war. The main bridge leading to town had been destroyed and was replaced by a makeshift bridge constructed by SFOR; the NATO-led Stabilization Force deployed to maintain the peace in Bosnia. These makeshift bridges dot the entire country.

We visited a village on the outskirts of Doboj called Makljenovac, a small community with a few dozen houses built on a hill overlooking the Bosna River on one side and the city of Doboj on the other side. The area was the site of intensive fighting between Serb and Muslim forces during the war, which tore this Serb and Muslim community apart. Makljenovac is typical of many Bosnian communities that have been affected by landmines. Most of the homes and buildings have been damaged or destroyed, large tracts of land have been mined, and the majority of the villagers live as refugees elsewhere in Bosnia and in neighboring Serbia. The village has received some international funding to aid the

demining and reconstruction effort. Like much of Bosnia, however, there has not been enough funding to adequately restore the community.

Makljenovac's primary school is located at the highest point in the village and was extensively shelled during the war. The playground and surrounding area are now littered with landmines. The school is one of 10 sites in Bosnia that have been adopted by Adopt-A-Minefield™ sponsors who have raised funds to remove landmines in mine-affected communities. The village was eerily quiet and desolate when we visited it. A handful of villagers returned after the war and have done their best to reclaim their lives. A lucky few have been able to repair their homes to a livable state, largely with the assistance of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which has also cleared small tracts of agricultural land for use by the villagers.

After visiting Makljenovac, we visited the small town of Skipovac, a farming community 30 kilome-

have since returned, but life is difficult. The few children that live in the village have to walk 30 minutes each way to school in the adjoining village of Sjenina Rijeka and both sides of the road on which they travel are heavily contaminated with mines. The villagers live in constant fear that one of the children will inadvertently activate a fragmentation mine.

Skipovac suffers the fate of many Bosnian towns. It is isolated and largely dependent on itself for food production. The presence of mines, however, makes it extremely dangerous to cultivate land. While the majority have heeded the warnings of authorities and not done so, some villagers, including an elderly couple who remained during the war, have decided that the need to grow food to survive outweighs all risks. The villagers of Skipovac have been lucky, but every so often in Bosnia, there is an ill-fated attempt to cultivate land that results in death or injury.

My next two days in Bosnia included visits to the Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Center



*Doboj, Bosnia and
Herzegovina. People still try to
cultivate their fields and
gardens despite the landmines.*

Photo c/o UNA/USA / Oren Schlein

ters from Doboj. Skipovac is a tranquil village along the former confrontation line. A few dozen houses line the main road through the town. Most of these homes are deserted, as are the local schoolhouse, the post office and the general store. Skipovac is heavily contaminated with mines — nearly all the agricultural land in the village is unusable. Only a handful of residents stayed through the war. Some villagers

(BHMAC) in Sarajevo and the two entity mine action centers in the Muslim/Croat Federation and the Republika Srpska. The entity mine action centers were established to reflect the political, ethnic, and religious makeup of the country. Each entity mine action center conducts mine-awareness and risk reduction programs, demining training, Level-one mine field surveys, mine field marking and mine

Bosnia

clearance operations in their respective territories. They also provide information to the BHMIC central landmine database and set work priorities. These activities enable the mine action centers to address the specific needs of the two Bosnian entities to develop sustainable, decentralized capacities to address the landmine problem.



Bijelo Polje, Koshos, Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Photo c/o UNA/USA / Oren Schlein

In all my discussions with mine action officials, a constant theme emerged — villages, towns and cities everywhere continue to suffer from the presence of landmines, several years after the war has ended. Despite the best intentions of the mine action centers, limited funding hampers their efforts to solve the problem. The plight suffered by so many Bosnians is that mines prevent the cultivation of land and the reconstruction of homes, which in turn prevent the return of refugees and the recovery and development of local economies. Hundreds of communities and thousands of lives are directly and indirectly affected by the mine contamination problem.

I concluded my trip to Bosnia with an emotionally charged visit to two very different mine-affected residential areas in Sarajevo. It is hard to capture the adrenaline rush that I experienced as I walked through these mined areas. I had spoken to many deminers and mine survivors, but nothing prepared me for this

day. Representatives from the Federation Mine Action Center served as my tour guides on this occasion. I was required to wear a flak jacket and always stayed closely behind my guides.

Our first stop was a neighborhood located in the hills above Sarajevo from where Serb forces had shelled the city below during the war. They occupied hundreds of homes in these hills, forming an almost impenetrable line of defense many miles long. Nearly all the homes had been shelled and fired upon, ransacked and heavily mined. There have been, and continue to be on occasion, many mine-related injuries and deaths in the area.

Norwegian People's Aid, a non-governmental demining organization, was clearing the area of mines during our visit. They had been here for several weeks, painstakingly searching for mines an inch at a time. Given the hilly terrain, the dense, overgrown bush and the rubble left over from the war, probing the ground manually was the most efficient demining technique. Neither dogs nor mechanical demining machines, which are so useful elsewhere, worked here.

As I surveyed the area and watched the deminers in action, I was surprised to see an old woman walking up the hill right beside the deminers and further amazed to see several children playing in the street below. It was only at this point in my trip that I realized just how precariously the people in mine-affected communities live. An inadvertent mistake by one of the deminers or an over-enthusiastic child straying off the main street could easily detonate a mine, resulting in death or injury to all those around. The real danger of landmines is that they remain active after hostility ceases and this once again became abundantly clear when we visited the second neighborhood on our tour.

The southern suburbs of Sarajevo occupy largely flat expanses of land. Like so much of the city, many of these communities were destroyed or badly damaged during the war. We visited a community of several dozen houses surrounded by fertile agricultural land. None of the houses were habitable, nor was the land cultivable because the area had been heavily

mined. My guides took me to this neighborhood because there had been a mine accident earlier that morning.

As we arrived at the scene, I was stunned by what I saw. We walked up to the second story of a house whose frame was a reminder of the home that used to exist there. No more than 30 feet away was a large crater in the ground and at least a dozen dead sheep. More than 100 feet away lay at least two dozen more dead sheep. One of the sheep had detonated a bounding mine, which had leapt up in the air and scattered its fragments in a 360-degree radius. All the sheep in the field died instantly. A lone shepherd, struck by grief at the loss of his flock and his livelihood, wandered aimlessly through the field. He was oblivious to the warnings of the deminers to leave the area, which could easily contain other mines.

As I left Sarajevo the following day, I was haunted by the image of the shepherd. Did he survive or did he fall victim to another landmine? It is a sobering experience to travel through hundreds of miles of small rural communities and large urban cen-

ters and witness firsthand the devastating, indiscriminate impact of landmines. Their legacy in Bosnia is all encompassing. While the magnitude of the landmine problem is overwhelming, small measures of support, whether financial or in-kind, do have a considerable impact on the lives of those individuals and communities they are intended to help. Together, we can all clear a path to a safer world. ■

Oren J. Schlein first became acquainted with landmines in March 1997 when he listened to an interview with Ken Rutherford, an American aid worker who lost both of his legs in a landmine explosion in Somalia. Mr. Schlein is the director for Adopt-A-Minefield. Mr. Rutherford is the co-founder of Landmine Survivors Network.

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Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. A shepherd investigates his flock of sheep a few minutes after they have been killed by a bounding mine. He entered the area despite warnings not to do so.
Photo c/o UNA/USA / Oren Schlein