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The Journal of Humanitarian Demining

From the Director's Desk

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HDIC

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Interview with the Program Manager, Mr. Richard Todd, of the United Nations (UN) Mine Action Center in Croatia.

[Director's Note: It is becoming increasingly evident that the functioning of a central coordinating facility is critical to the overall success of a humanitarian demining mission. These mine action centers (MAC) are now proving their worth in several countries. We felt it would be helpful if we highlighted the organization, function, and goals of selected MACs. We wish to point out however, that no one MAC design will be the answer to all mine action missions. Therefore, in this issue we decided to spotlight two very different, but very effective MACs to showcase effective methods, while at the same time illustrating differing approaches.

We believe that a careful evaluation of the interviews of the representatives of both the Cambodian Mine Action Center and the Croatia Mine Action Center can yield valuable lessons learned and suggest ways of increasing the effectiveness and cohesiveness of a nascent existing action program.]

Conducted September 30, 1997.

Q: What is the job of the Mine Action Center (MAC) in Croatia and by whose authority does it operate?

A: The UN Peacekeeping Organization has authorized the MAC to operate in conjunction with the host-nation, Croatia. Because Croatia is a highly developed and technically advanced country, we need to be particularly sensitive about not performing duties that the Croatians can do themselves. We merely help to develop training, operational plans, as well as guidelines for selecting projects. In addition, we provide a dependable information database.

Q: I want to talk about the database in just a minute, but first, can you tell me how your staff is organized?

A: We have nine international workers and 24 Croatians. The staff has turned out to be a good mix of those who understand both the general threat of landmines and the work of other demining organizations, as well as those who understand firsthand the impact of landmines.

Q: What kinds of data do you collect?

A: We collect mine data to use in clearing mines and unexploded ordnance. Specifically, we look for mine locations, records of landmine injuries, areas cleared or landmines, and suspected minefield locations. At this point, we have recorded accurate data coverage of 40 to 50% of Croatia.

Q: How do you obtain information about landmines?

A: We receive information from the Croatian Army, Ministry of the Interior, police, neighboring countries, minefield records, and even through discussions with the local population. We also collect data on mine casualties and incidents.

Q: How is that information used within Croatia?

A: We assist local communities within Croatia to produce countermine plans for each county. The government of Croatia selects the local representatives and we work with them to design projects, establish priorities, conduct surveys, and plan mine-clearance projects. We coordinate these projects with the Council for Demining, a group of eight government ministries. The Council for Demining also suggests new demining projects.

Q: Does anyone other than Croatian officials have access to your landmine information?

A: Any person or organization demonstrating a legitimate need can have access to our information— example, a government agency; international organization involved with refugee return, reconstruction, or development; as well as a demining organization, either commercial or non-government organization (NGO). We will not, however, give the information to individuals who want it for private purposes because smugglers have tried to use the information to find ways through the minefields to avoid police. In addition, some newspaper people from other countries have wanted information to write sensational articles about tourists being allowed to go into mined areas, which is incorrect. Again, anyone with a clear need that we can substantiate can have access to the information.

Q: How can a person or organization that demonstrates a legitimate need access the landmine information?

A: They can come to the MAC headquarters in Zagreb or one of our four regional offices in Vukovar, Daruvar, Karlovac or Knin. Because we are not online to the outside world, all they need to do is tell us what they need, and we will print the map information for them and give them what records we have of an area. We will only give the information for a certain area to support a project. The cost of giving out information is relatively high. Besides other costs, it involves printing special maps, and there is 13,000 square kilometers that are potentially contaminated. We sometime print large-scale maps for events, such as briefings. Again, I stress that minefield records and special area maps are limited to those who have a need.

Q: Do you process any other kind of information?

A: The key to declaring areas safe, as well as knowing where we need to clear landmines, depends on accurate maps. Consequently, we are transforming spatial data into normal and usable geographic information formats.

Q: Besides information gathering and processing, what else does the MAC

do?

A: We conduct a quality-assurance program in which the central office in Zagreb, as well as the four regional offices,

1. review the composition and competence of mine-clearing teams,
2. review demining plans and projects,
3. check demining projects in progress, and
4. perform quality checks on completed projects.

Q: Do you get into the "training" business?

A: Yes, we train in mine-clearance and quality-assurance methods, as well as mine-awareness techniques. Our trainees include representatives of international organizations and Croatian NGOs.

Q: Are all of the demining projects designed around mine clearance?

A: No, one of our most important programs is mine awareness. We work with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross in coordinating mine-awareness activities.

Q: Who is performing demining operations in Croatia?

A: Mungos is a commercial demining company, created by the Ministry of the Interior, with 200 deminers. The Army Center for Demining has 640 operators, and the Special Police assigned 99 personnel to demining.

Q: Are many NGOs involved in humanitarian demining in Croatia?

A: No. Until now, Croatia has attempted to form its demining program with in-country assets and thus avoid the pangs of NGO withdrawal. Consequently, I have created a database of interested NGOs and their capabilities. When necessary, we can draw upon them to supplement our efforts. One German NGO, Gerbera, has done limited demining in the UNTAES region (eastern Slavonia) not under control of the Croatian Government. The law for demining will most likely be changed in January to allow international demining companies and probably NGOs to work in Croatia. This change was brought about by the World Bank requirement for international bids and tenders for demining financed by a World Bank loan.

Q: What would you like to see happen to the MAC in the future?

A: I would like to see the transition of MAC control from the UN to Croatia. Croatia could well plan and execute demining programs with the data, experience, and procedures we have compiled. Of course, our ultimate goal is for Croatia to maintain a sustainable demining program, and I believe that she has the political will to do that. I hope that our work can be transformed into a process that allows the MAC to manage its component parts efficiently.

For additional information on the Mine Action Center in Croatia, Mr. Todd may be reached via e-mail at Richard.Todd@public.srce.hr.