

# From Kosovo to Afghanistan, Cluster Bombs Again

Cluster bombs have created problems in several countries, as they are one of the many unexploded hazards often left behind after a conflict. This article gives an overview of the threat and shows how the organization Intersos has been working to help clear up the problem.

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## Background

Cluster bomb units (CBUs) are well known from the Gulf War to post-Dayton Bosnia, but they were completely forgotten by the Ottawa Treaty, which didn't recognize them as APLs. In Kosovo and in Afghanistan, they have proven to be more dangerous than APLs.

Cluster bombs are UXO that became well known in Italy when some fishermen found them in their nets in the Adriatic Sea. Apart from the fishermen, whose security was threatened, nobody at that time spoke out in Italy about the future danger: hundreds of these UXO would spread in Kosovo and Serbian territory, killing and injuring people, mostly children. In fact, CBUs don't have a self-deactivating device that disables them if they do not explode, so they remain as a long-lasting danger for civilians, and they can explode with a slight touch or upon removal.

Modern CBU models are BL-7 and BL-755, made in the United States, and MK-41, made in the United Kingdom. They are the "elder sisters" of the weapons used in Kuwait and of the KB-1 used by Serbs and Muslim Bosnian people during the Balkan Wars.

CBUs differ from APLs in their appearance, the former being more colourful and intriguing, so that they can trigger people's curiosity. An APL is basically a defensive ordnance with a

local target, while a CBU is an offensive ordnance with a wide-area target. CBUs are real unexploded traps with much more explosive capacity than APLs, as an APL can kill at a range of 50 m, while a CBU can be fatal at a range of 150 m.

In fact, CBUs are dropped during air raids in dispensers with a capacity of more than 200 bombs each, landing randomly on the ground. When they do not explode, they hide in the grass or under the ground, up to 50 cm deep, so that nobody can really tell where they are. In principle, APLs should be mapped, making their identification, marking and clearance easier and allowing civilians to avoid them. CBU impact areas, instead, are very wide targets, difficult to identify and map before systematic surveys and clearance are carried out. They can be identified starting from their drop point, if known, or by tracing them on the ground in a sequence.

## CBUs in Kosovo

CBU producers claim a dud rate not higher than five percent, but according to our field experience, the actual percentage is much more significant. At the end of the war, in fact, the biggest and most urgent problem of Kosovo was that of unexploded CBUs. In the spring of 2000, CBUs were spread everywhere on the ground, hindering the economic development and agricultural activities after the winter of war.



■ The BL-97 (top and bottom)

In those days, we knew exactly where 90 percent of Kosovo's mines were, because the Serbs handed over the maps of registered mined areas to the international community. But we didn't know with the same accuracy where CBUs had been dropped. In fact, we had little news on Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) coordinates of dropping points, which made it virtually impossible to fix the actual affected areas and quantify the real problem.

Immediately, the international community launched an appeal to quickly



fund and eliminate the threat. The international answer was fast and appropriate, with a substantial economic pledge and the professionalism of five major international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These specialized in humanitarian clearance in general and, more specifically, in the problem of CBUs.

Among these NGOs was the Intersos Mine Action Unit, a unique Italian NGO that, besides a humanitarian relief project, has conducted humanitarian mine and UXO clearance as well as mine risk education projects since 1997.

International actors spent two years clearing CBUs from Kosovo. Nowadays, the final work is carried out by the Kosovo Protection Civil Agency, with local experts trained at the beginning by the international technical experts of the Intersos Mine Action Unit and other international NGOs.

## CBUs in Other Countries

The threat of CBUs in the Balkans is not only a problem in Kosovo. In the Republic of Serbia, for example, UXO remain everywhere—even in public gardens—as the Intersos Mine Action Unit's experts pointed out in June 2001 after an accurate assessment of the territory to define the magnitude of the problem.

In Afghanistan, we found a dud rate as high as 50 percent in some case. It is to be mentioned that, prior to the Coalition Forces Military Campaign, battle area clearance (BAC) operations in Afghanistan were mainly conducted by surface clearing. The widespread use of CBUs during the air campaign and the

lethality of cluster submunitions have forced the Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan (MACA) to adopt stricter Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) similar to the ones adopted by the UN Mine Action Centres in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), where the depth of clearance for CBUs is set at 500 mm. Thus, it was necessary to train BAC teams on the use of the Schonsted metal detector, a new instrument specifically designed for detecting ferrous materials to a depth of 500 mm. Intersos provided approximately 60 Schonsted detectors to the Afghan NGO partner and trained three BAC teams to use them properly and efficiently.

The following are two main examples of CBU data collected:

1. Kabul Province, Karoti Village: 363,500 sq m infested by mines (agricultural and grazing ground). Dispensers dropped: 4. Total cluster bombs dropped (BL-97): 800. With 80 percent of the area cleared, we found 484 unexploded BL-97s (60 percent of the total).

2. Kabul Province, Mosazajee Village: 248,000 sq m infested by mines (agricultural and grazing ground). Dispensers dropped: 6. Total cluster bombs dropped (BL-97): 1,200. With 90 percent of the area cleared, we found 513 unexploded BL-97s (43 percent of the total).

## CBUs and the International Community

Overall, CBUs are not considered similar in the effects to APLs. For this

reason, they were not restricted by the Ottawa Treaty. Cluster bombs, which continue to be used, pollute the environment and are a serious threat for civilians. They represent a real limitation to the economic development of states and a serious economic burden for the international community.

In fact, a matter of primary importance is to conduct humanitarian clearance of these affected territories, which means areas need to be 99.6 percent clear, as international standards dictate. This kind of percentage involves great costs and long term funds from the international community, but gives back a lot in terms of saving human lives.

Therefore, we believe that the international community should pay much more attention to every country affected by CBUs, as a global and humanitarian justice. And mostly, we believe that the international community should address much more attention to the issue of possible further use of CBUs in upcoming conflicts, as in Iraq. ■

*\*All graphics courtesy of the author.*

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Village	Area Mined (in sq m)	Total number of CBUs dropped	Percent of area cleared	Number of unexploded CBUs
Karoti	363,500	800	80	484 (60 percent)
Mosazajee	248,200	1,200	90	513 (43 percent)

■ Figure 1: Examples of CBU data collected.