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True Stories From Mine Victims in Northern Albania

The Mine and Weapon Victims Association (MVA) has worked to keep the population of 39 border villages in northern Albania informed about mine threats. MVA has also helped victims rehabilitate and reintegrate into society. Izet Ademi and Lumturi Muhadri are among those working successfully with the MVA.

by Aurora Bushati, *UNICEF Albania*

The Story of Izet Ademi

This is the story of Izet Ademi, who lives in the village of Bardhoc in northeastern Albania, three km from the Morini border with Kosovo. A landmine accident on May 27, 1999, changed his life. He lost his right leg forever.

Izet comes from a traditional, proud family. His father has worked as a teacher for more than 35 years in the villages around Kukës. Born in October 1969, Izet was the first son and, by tradition, the hope of the family. He grew up herding his animals. He attended high school in Bardhoc, his birthplace, and did well. Although he received good grades in high school, there was no money for him to attend college. The family eked out a living at the poverty level. Izet married Xhemile from Bicaj in 1996. They have three children, two young daughters and a son who is five years old.

When the conflict in Kosovo started, Izet was serving in the ranks of Border Police in his village. "One day, one ill-fated day," Izet tells us calmly, "Thursday, May 27, 1999, will not be forgotten. It changed my life." Slowly Izet describes the events that led to his accident. "The caravans of Kosovars, mainly women and children expelled by the paramilitary Serb forces, seemed never ending." Izet had taken orders from his commander to patrol the border near Morini, two hours way from the border post. "No one believed it would come to this. They had planted landmines in Albanian territory inside the border. Maybe the Serb forces understood that the end was in sight."

As usual, Izet, together with his friends Dan Shahu and Tarzan Vesel, started patrolling the border. When they reached a spot about one km from the border near a place called "Hurdha e Thelle," where children and other villagers bring animals to graze in the summer and where they gather wood for winter, a sudden explosion was heard. Izet felt himself crashing to the ground. His radio and his Kalashnikov flew into the air. "I lost my mind. I was in immediate agony," he noted, "I was hallucinating, dreaming that I was in a field full of beautiful flowers. As I regained consciousness, I felt a terrible pain. I felt that something was missing from my body. I tried to touch my legs but everything seemed wrong.... I saw that my foot had fled with the Kalashnikov. Dan was trying to move me. I was half alive, half unconscious, half dead. I had only one thing in my mind, my son's name. I remember I pronounced faintly, 'Altjon—where is Altjon? I saw him around.... Where is Tarzan? Is he alive? What has this bloody war done to our lives?' At the moment when Dan managed to lift me up off the ground, I fully understood that I had lost my leg forever. When I saw the blood flowing, cursing, I remember saying, 'Ah, Dan, it's my children who will suffer

forever.... Who will look after them from now on? Their fate will be like the fate of street children.' I recall that he turned to me and said, '*Hajt bre burre* (hey, old fellow), things will get better. Pull yourself together.' Our friend, Basria, looked after me while Dan collected the Kalashnikov and radio and took care of Tarzan, who had an eye injury. On the road to Kukes, we couldn't stem the bleeding. Dan tore his shirt to provide a makeshift tourniquet. In 15 minutes, the other team arrived to give assistance to the wounded."

The news of the accident immediately spread through the village. Everyone rushed to the door of the border post. They all looked devastated and angry. First Aid was given in the Italian Field Hospital near Kukes. Izet and Tarzan were transported by a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation/UN High Commissioner for Refugees (NATO/UNHCR) helicopter to the military hospital in Tirana.

With a basic artificial limb, Izet went through the tough process of rehabilitation. He returned home to start a new life, feeling isolated and alone, and trapped within four walls, thinking about the busy and active life that he lived only a few months before. Even some of his friends started to disappear. Gloom set in and he was always thinking of his children and feeling he could no longer support and help them as before. A new era started for him. He became depressed. Feelings of despondency replaced the hopes of a positive new start. Many organizations started to visit him, but only with words and promises. His only concern was his family, his children and their future and his wife who had no income. In the village where he lived he had only 500 sq m of land and one cow.

One day MVA appeared in the village and knocked on his door. "This happened in June 2001," he says. "I was very sceptical, because other organizations had already approached me and had taken some pictures and had disappeared, promising me the moon, but then in fact not even bringing back the photo. Then these folks from the MVA told me they were organizing a local NGO to protect the rights and opportunities of landmine victims. They planned to raise awareness and also to try to prevent more people from suffering my fate. I knew one of them. He came as a reporter from Radio "Kukesi." He was someone to be taken seriously." So I said, "Since you are leading this initiative, I know things really will happen."

Izet joined the organization. Things moved forward and the organization received funds from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for mine risk education (MRE) and reintegration of victims. The organization offered Izet the position of the Field Monitor. At the beginning, still needing to be instilled with confidence, he hesitated. But the team convinced him to accept, offering him the support he needed. Gradually, he became part of the team. He moves from one village to another to talk to the villagers in border areas about the landmine threat. He distributes posters, speaks with children and youngsters. He became computer literate. Now Izet is a happy, good-humored optimist. An English volunteer who came to help the organization portrayed him as "fshatar gezuar" (happy villager). Now everyone in the team calls him the "happy villager." He is a positive, cheerful role model and ready to help victims re-integrate into society. This is thanks to UNICEF—as he often stresses.

The Story of Lumturi Muhadri

This is the story of Lumturi Muhadri, a 12-year-old boy living in the village of Vlahen in the Has region of northeastern Albania, one km away from the border with Kosovo. An accident on October 30, 2002, changed his life when he lost sight in one eye.

Lumturi Muhadri's house is only two km away from the border with Kosovo. He is a lad of 12 years with three brothers and three sisters, the oldest of whom is only 18 years old. Young Lumturi is in his fifth year of school. None of his family members work. They attempt to survive on the \$20 (U.S.) in government assistance given to his father—a surplus from his work at the former copper mine. The family is very poor. One cow, one donkey and 1100 sq m of land are all they own. Their goats died by stumbling into landmines in 1999.

The grazing areas and communal forest around the village are now mined. The minefields start only 500 m from their front door. What are they to do? The family knows of the

danger on their doorstep. Vlahen's 900 inhabitants live in little houses spread over a wide area of remote hillside.

Everyone in the village lives as though expecting an ambush, listening, scared that at any minute they will hear of the next victim. Any loud bang brings the whole village running in trepidation to see what tragedy has struck. "The latest victim, but doubtless not the last victim," they say. "Another friend out collecting wood stepped on a landmine, another friend grazing the sheep fallen victim, a child playing just a bit too far off the path."

Where else can these children go to allow the animals to graze? Up until 1993, Lumturi's father, like so many of his neighbors, used to work in the copper mine. The village of Vlahen had always been totally dependent on the copper mine and on small-scale animal husbandry. Now the copper mine has closed down. The areas have been mined in a different and deadly way by Serb forces. Death is planted in the earth.

One autumn day, after returning home from school, Lumturi went out as usual. The sun had shone longer than usual this autumn and he felt happy as he set off with his friends to allow their only remaining cow and donkey to graze. Landmine accidents had already robbed them of some of their animals and the demands of making a living at the poverty line had robbed them of the others.

Over the last two years, they had taken to grazing the animals in an area they judged as safe, about two km away from the border with Kosovo. It was ironically called a "safety area," but turned out to be far from safe. One unwitting false move and the lethal landmine changed Lumturi's life forever, robbing him of the sight in his right eye.

"I was playing while the animals were grazing," he said. "I ran toward a bush to catch my improvised ball, but suddenly...I heard an explosion and it felt like my eye had been ripped out. I fell to the ground in terrible pain. It seemed as if my head had been blown off my body. A warm liquid started to pour out of my leg. Then, I can't remember what happened to me. I was unconscious, lost in a dream until I awoke, finding myself in a hospital bed with my father and mother standing by my side, tears in their eyes and tears running down their cheeks. I remember asking for my friend, but he was hours and hours away up in our village. I could see nothing with my right eye, which was covered in bandages. It wasn't long before the doctor had to tell me that he felt I would never be able to see again with that eye. I could not hold back the tears. I thought of my friends; I wouldn't be able to play with them as before. How would I be able to go to school and do my work?"

Now, with impaired sight, Lumturi does have problems getting to school safely. Thankfully, his brother is able to accompany him on the long walk over the rough hillside from home to school. Fortunately, his leg injury was superficial, but he can't read and write like before. His teacher, Bajram, told us that Lumturi was among the best pupils, but now he feels the boy is under great strain. He has good, loyal friends, but his accident has created such problems for his progress. Something more should be done to help him learn to cope with his injury. Bajram also told us that Lumturi is not the only child who has been injured by mines. In Vlahen village there are five other children like him with lost or damaged legs and arms. Four of them have already given up school. Maybe a classroom assistant could be funded to support these pupils with special needs.

Lumturi continued his story, "Then the Mine and Weapon Victims Association came and supported me for a few days at the hospital and later at home. They visit me often and this gives me hope, as they always tell me that they are trying to find people interested in helping me. I just hope someone will really feel for our plight up here in this remote and forgotten part of Europe and give a modest contribution so that we can change our lives. Just a little money can make a change, can raise our hopes and can help us to help ourselves to better our lives. One doctor even told me that with a special operation they might even be able to restore my sight. He said that there are clinics abroad where they can check every detail of what has happened to my eye and possibly restore my sight. I wish that didn't have to remain a dream. Who knows, maybe then, in years to come, I will be able to become a doctor myself and use my expertise to help others. But I suppose that too will need to remain a dream."

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