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The BHMAC: A New Law, New Structure and New Hope in Bosnia

After years of struggling with an inefficient mine action structure, a new determination now has revived the Bosnia-Hercegovina Mine Action Centre (BHMAC). Bosnians finally have the means to conquer their landmine troubles.

by JJ Scott, MAIC

Introduction

A new law enacted in March of 2002 marked the beginning of a Bosnian mine action renaissance that will improve everything from national program management to individual minefield procedures. A complete restructuring and reorganization of the Bosnia-Hercegovina Mine Action Center (BHMAC) will finally allow the "head" of Bosnian mine action to effectively direct the bodies beneath it, and to responsibly report to the government through the Demining Commission. The Bosnian government formulated the demining law and will help fund its implementation—an extraordinary step toward its goal of effective national program ownership.

The new law and the structures it creates finally give Bosnian mine action practitioners a management system that is attuned to their own culture and unique landmine situation—indispensable weapons in the struggle to free their nation from the landmines holding it hostage.

History/War

Over three years of fighting (1992–1995) among several different armies along undulating front lines left a very complicated and extensive (landmine) problem in a complex environment, says Mr. Rowe, Program Manager of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and adviser to the BHMAC. Demining Commission and International Board of Donors. Mr. Rowe moved to Bosnia during the war and has been involved in Bosnian mine action since the beginning. He has survived the BHMAC's progression from mine action side-show to center-stage attraction.

To appreciate the turnaround now taking place, some background is necessary. Mr. Rowe describes the mine threat left by the war as "quite complex because of its extent, because of its low density and because of its random nature," making "the landmine problem here less quantifiable than in other parts of the world."

Knowing refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) would soon try returning home, the United Nations set up a mine action center in 1996. The international community decided that Bosnians should run their own mine action program, handing over all responsibilities on July 1, 1998. The Bosnians inherited a structure that was "a development program in a 100 percent task-oriented environment... a decision perhaps more designed to accommodate political needs than immediate practical post-war considerations," says Mr. Rowe. Under that structure, the State-level BHMAC was essentially subservient to the two relatively autonomous Entity MACs (one representing the Federation of Bosnia-Hercegovina and one for the Republic of Srpska), effectively preventing it from wielding any real managerial influence over demining operations.

Many in Bosnia feel that the United Nations handed the program over to Bosnian authorities a bit too early, before either the MAC or the Bosnian government was ready.

By late 2000, a budget crisis created and exacerbated by allegations of corruption and mismanagement at the highest

Southeastern Europe Approach

In order to have a broader scope and to share experience with neighboring countries, we used an approach kindly provided by the European Commission (EC) to start a project on regional data sharing. So far, the beneficiaries of the project are the following countries in southeastern Europe (SEE) region: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, and Austria—and this list is expected to grow.

So far, we have sent four experts to the Joint Research Center and information interchange has proven possible. Based on data incompatibility, it becomes obvious that some sort of standardization has to take place. Thus, we agreed on standard hardware and software packages. In order to be able to show data for the region on a single map, we agreed on basics for use of the satellite images, and we have images provided for the region. Prior to the information interchange, we had a four-day meeting in Sarajevo yielding some information interchange core standards for SEE.1 Based on experience gained through these activities, exported data sent could be harmonized. Once a standard for information interchange is provided, information can be interchange. An exporting exercise helped a lot because some of the mistakes became visible. "A house cleaning" was necessary. More than that, countries within the region are helping each other sort out their problems. A good illustration of this is the BHMAC's GPS campaign in Albania. Since all participants provided data without problems, SEE could be used as an example of diversity in number. In fact, the "one-size-does-not-fit-all" philosophy is fully accepted, it was considerably easy to achieve awareness on information-sharing benefits.

Having seen all aspects of information sharing and cooperation, I think it is time for the Global Information Exchange Standard for mine action. We fully support the Mine Action Environment Markup Language (mXML) initiative, which becomes more and more accepted as a standard protocol for information interchange.

Endnotes

1. Results of the conference can be seen at http://www.bhrcc.org/Info/info/conferences/conferences_en.htm

Contact Information

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levels left the three MACs on the verge of collapse. Demining and surveying operations slowed dramatically. In a drastic (but not completely uncalled for) move, the High Representative dismissed the three-man Demining Commission, citing corruption and misuse of influence. It was a highly visible symptom of the otherwise shadowy affliction lurking through government corridors, covertly sapping the MACs' dedicated staffs of the ability to manage life-saving mine action activities—the organization's ultimate mandate. Mr. Rowe feels "the national team should be commended for keeping the show alive and going forward—albeit slowly" during this period.

New Hope

"Sometimes things have to be at the brink of collapse—it has to be very clear to all involved that things are not well—before you can get positive change and head in the right direction," Mr. Rowe remarks, looking back at that critical period. The Bosnian government realized that much of its economic, health care, infrastructure and redevelopment woes were related to leftover landmines, and they finally made a concerted effort to address the problem with a logical, legiti­mately Bosnian solution. The Bosnian mine action structure needed replacement, not refurbishment, and in early 2001 work started on a law that would create a new, tenable organization.

First, the Bosnian government drafted a new, tenable organization. With the assistance of Mr. Bryant as technical advisor, the MACs were charged with developing a new law and the legislature approved the law in March 2002.

Management Level

The law centralized management and development functions—formerly shared and/or fought over by the two Entity MACs—within the BHMAC, leaving day-to-day operational decisions to subordinate offices in Sarajevo (the Federation) and Banja Luka (the Republic). Mr. Mladen Gavran, newly-appointed Director of the BHMAC, believes that this new arrangement will yield several tangible benefits. "Before, the entity govern­ments dictated priorities. Nothing was coordinated. Now, some ministry-level de­partments will rule over the two governments. The Entity governments will submit priorities, and all informa­tion will be concentrated in one spot. The Bosnian council of ministers will then decide the priorities." This should increase communication and cooperation between the Entities and the BHMAC, but if they can't reach an agreement on priorities, the central BHMAC will always have the final word.

Since most functions previously car­ried out by the Entity MACs are now under the BHMAC’s jurisdiction, many people had to update their business cards as their jobs, offices and titles changed. "Often, the person who was performing a certain function simply transferred that function to a new system, perhaps not even in a new office," remarks Mr. Rowe. He adds, "This was not designed to be under the BHMAC’s direction, many people had to update their business cards as their jobs, offices and titles changed. It was designed to set up the centralized structure necessary to formulate and manage national demining policy." Therefore, "when the dust settles, we may end up with about the same number of people, the differ­ence being the way in which they work within a single cooperative body." By re­garding the Entity MACs as experienced workers, the BHMAC will accomplish more than just conserve pink slips. Long-time em­ployees know what they’re doing, have a feel for how things tick, and can thus contribute a priceless Bosnian mine action asset. Prior to his arrival at the BHMAC, Mr. Gavran conducted an analysis of their inadequate technical staff, that there were no experts there. After a few weeks on the job, he found that his staff was ex­perienced, "they have become experts," even without special training. Those appoint­ment-masters will help lead the Bosnian mine action revolution from the top.

Operational Level

The redesign of the BHMAC and its subsequent Entity offices are already be­ginning their work, and Mr. Rowe expects to see "some considerable ad­vances fairly quickly, especially in the area of long-term strategy and management of the annual work plans." Mine action requires a good roadmap, the new BHMAC can provide that, but a map doesn’t help anyone when used incor­rectly. Planning and management are important, but nothing is accomplished without someone doing it right. Mr. Gavran feels that in the past, "every inspector means when he recommends or added or omitted something" on his/her report, leaving unverified or overlooked information.

Under each demining asset’s strengths and weaknesses is integral to understanding Bosnian demining. NGOs

NGOs complete a large percentage of the demining tasks in Bosnia each year. They are independently funded (no Bosnian government support), rely on stable organizations. Many are foreign charity groups. The BHMAC has no direct control over NGOs, save task allocation, quality control and accredita­tion. Still, NGOs typically try to act in the nation’s best interest, according to the BHMAC’s wishes. Once NGOs have the same wishes. Mr. Stephen Bryant is the Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA) program manager for Bosnian operations. NPA is a major NGO in Bosnia, maintain­ing staff of about 200 Bosnians (and some ex-pats, including Mr. Bryant) as they help build local capacity, teach management skills to develop infrastructure—their end goal. Mr. Bryant reports that NPA provides high quality training in Bosnia, and they help build local capacity, teach management skills, develop infrastructure—and do big-time demining throughout the county. NPA’s involvement in Bosnia is typical of many NGOs, and also represents something of an ideal: NPA maintains an excellent reputation by regularly achieving its goals, which de­lights its donors and draws more donations, allowing them to set even more ambitious goals. NPA Bosnia op­erations is a long-term development program that will total about 11 years. Significantly, they’re about to hand over demining operations in the Republic of Serbia to Civil Protection. The transition has begun.

Commercial Companies

Commercial companies often spec­ialize in one area of demining, allowing them to complete tasks for less money than general demining organizations. An economist would say that specialized companies have a comparative advantage over other groups in their focus area. An NGO, the government or even another company often hires a commercial company to complete a specific segment of a larger job, saving the client money. Demining companies’ concern for the bottom line leads to dynamic, innovative and cost-effective solutions to tough problems. European Landmine Solutions (ELS) is a company that focuses on me­chanical area preparation. When hired,
they drive huge armored flails back and forth over a minefield, beating the ground with rotating chains to remove all vegetation. That's—no clearance, no survey, just men with huge machines clearing the way for manual deminers or dogs to follow. Thorough area preparation removes any tripping from deminers' paths and, more importantly, triggers any tripping tripwires straddling the minefield. In Bosnia, near-visible tripwires filament often lead to a nasty Yugoslav mine called the PROM-1. When activated, the PROM-1's explosive charge shoots upward about four feet before detonating, spraying shrapnel over a much wider area than conventional blast mines. Deminers really appreciate ELS services. The ELS business model requires heavy input from Bosnian workers, depending on savvy locals to help the company improve operations. According to Mr. Paul Simmons, ELS' Bosnian office manager, local crews operate and maintain all of ELS' equipment, learn all winter, trading tool tips and shop talk.

Entity Armies/Civil Protection

Immediately after the war, only the Entity armies had any idea where mines might be—they laid many of them, after all. They were the first wave of demining activity in Bosnia. The armies' work was more militarily strategic than humanitarian, and international NGOs and commercial companies soon supplemented them, but their discipline, knowledge and decent equipment make them valuable assets nonetheless. As the NGOs and commercial companies slowly migrate to other demining hotspots, the Entity armies may see the lead in solving their problems, and that's always the best way to go.

Conclusion

A relatively small proportion of the work, but in the future, when most priority minefields are cleared, Civil Protection will conduct needed spot demining and emergency calls whenever needed. In the end, Bosnians will have only Bosnians demining their nation: the triumphant endgame of the Bosnian battle against landmines.

References

Most information for this article is from interviews with Mr. David Rowen, Mr. Darren Gravett, Mr. Stephen Bryant and Mr. Paul Simmons in Sarajevo during June and July of 2002. I thank them for their cooperation and hospitality. Any errors, misrepresentations or mischaracterizations in this article are my fault alone.

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Demining During Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan

The U.S. and Coalition forces' occupation of airfields at Bagram and Kandahar in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom was initially hampered by the presence of a large number of mines and UXO in both the immediate and surrounding areas of the airfields. U.S. and Coalition forces quickly came to understand that traditional countermeasures to demining operations were insufficient to ensure troop habitability and operational safety inside high-risk, high-intensity areas such as those encountered in Afghanistan. This experience strongly suggests that the U.S. Army should assess its current countermeasures and doctrine and introduce a doctrinal modification to take into account the future need to deal with mines and UXO in and around base areas.

by John L. Wilkinson, Vice President, Operations, RONCO Consulting Corporation

Introduction

In many ways, Operation Enduring Freedom has diverged from the usual pattern of U.S. and Coalition military operations that developed since the Vietnam War. Whether small-scale operations such as Urgent Fury in Grenada or Just Cause in Panama, or much larger-scale operations such as Desert Shield/Desert Storm in the Gulf or Allied Force in Serbia, the usual pattern since the 1970s has been one of mounting operations into enemy territory from friendly territory, and the usual pattern has been not to occupy enemy territory for extended periods of time. While Operation Enduring Freedom began as did the others mentioned above, with the collapse of the Taliban government, Marine, U.S. Army and Coalition forces occupied Bagram and Kandahar airfields inside Afghanistan. Both have since been used as semi-permanent operational bases from which to conduct further military operations against the remnants of Al Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan and adjoining border areas with Pakistan. This change of pattern may well come more of the norm as the war against terrorism progresses and U.S. and Coalition forces find themselves operating with increasing frequency from bases that are not necessarily in friendly or non-combat areas. As a result, and based on the experience since February 2002 in Afghanistan, the U.S. Army's doctrine on dealing with mines is likely to require revision on, at least, expansion to cover situations such as those encountered in Afghanistan.

Mine Clearance vs. Demining

In U.S. Army doctrine, there is a clear delineation of responsibility between mine clearance operations, which are conducted by the Corps of Engineers, and removal and disposal of UXO, which is the responsibility of Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) teams attached to or integrated with combat units. Furthermore, there is a clear distinction in doctrine between mine clearance and demining; the latter, in fact, is not acknowledged as a military mission. Army doctrine calls for breaching or clearing lines of communication through minefields, clearly demarcating the cleared borders, and moving through as quickly as operationally possible. A certain number of casualties are recognized as inevitable in such operations. Military minefields are usually laid to channel or delay movement, so that direct or indirect fire, or both, can be brought to bear on an opposing force that has slowed down or is concentrated at certain pre-determined points as it attempts to traverse or avoid the minefield. As a result, Army doctrine emphasizes speed in dealing with such obstacles so as to engage and defeat the enemy directly, while reducing the exposure of units to enemy fire. At this point, it is useful to note that Army doctrine on mine clearance continues to reflect readiness for a war of rapid movement, such as was expected in Europe and was carried out in the Gulf War. On the other hand, demining or humanitarian demining, where the goal is to render defined areas mine-free or more properly mine-safe, is not recognized as a military mission in doctrine. While it is true that U.S. Special Forces personnel receive training in humanitarian demining at Fort Leonard Wood, they do so in order to teach to foreign military personnel. In combat, Special Forces do not have demining or humanitarian demining as a mission and they do not, indeed, have mine clearance as a mission either.