



by Sarah Sensamaust and Margaret Robertson,
Mine Action Information Center

In the 1990s, the collapse of the former Soviet Union led to the eventual disintegration of Yugoslavia. Consequently, the Croatian government's decision to break away from Yugoslavia in 1991 prompted resistance from Belgrade and an uprising by the Serbian minority. During these years of conflict, all involved parties laid landmines as both offensive and defensive weapons against enemy forces. The mines were used to protect areas of strategic and economic importance, such as railway lines, power stations and pipelines. After Croatia's secession in 1991, the country went to war with the Serbs, specifically over the area known as Slavonia. The Serbian army controlled this region and the area of Krajina until April 1995 when the Croatian Defense Council reclaimed western Slavonia. In response to Croatia's victory, the Serbs bombed Zagreb, Croatia's capital. Despite Serbian efforts to potentially halt Croatia's independence, the Croatian army pursued the Serbs.

After four years of fighting with the Serbs, the Croatian army successfully defeated enemy forces near Croatian territory in 1995. Later that year, the country decided to abandon the Dayton Peace Accords and Croatian officials struck a new agreement that mandated that the Serbs leave the disputed fertile and oil-rich region of Slavonia. Therefore, eastern Slavonia returned to Croatian control on January 15, 1998.

Landmine Problem

Because Yugoslavia was a major producer of landmines, these weapons were readily available and used in large quantities during the war. Recent estimates suggest that 14 of the 21 counties in Croatia are contaminated by mines or items of UXO. Known and suspected mined areas total 1,354.5 square kilometers (522.98 square miles) and include 419,442 anti-personnel mines and 205,801 anti-vehicle mines. Based on current minefield records, there are approximately 200 confirmed square kilometers (77.22 square miles) contaminated with 166,741 anti-personnel mines of seven known types as well as 5,101 anti-personnel mines of unknown types and 101,621 anti-vehicle mines.

Megan Burke, a program manager for Adopt-A-Minefield says, "Mined land is mainly in



residential, agricultural and pasture land, endangering people's lives and preventing recovery of the agricultural sector in Croatia."¹ Though 1.1 million Croats live in these mine-affected areas, large parts of Croatia have not been occupied for years. These deserted areas create an economic problem due to the lack of infrastructure development. In April 2004, the Croatian government reported 11,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a result of regional tensions. Because landmines prevent many of these people from returning to their homes, the economic and social stability of the country suffers.

Clearance

Numerous projects are under way to decrease the hazards caused by landmines and items of UXO in Croatia. Charitable individuals, along with funds and fellowships provided by governmental agencies and other organizations, sponsor the excavating process. According to Burke, "Clearance over the last few years has steadily reduced the number of new victims to less than 20... a year for the last two years."¹ In 2003, 285 square kilometers (110.04 square miles) of mine-affected and mine-suspected land were returned to communities for productive use. These clearance efforts brought Croatia's total land demined since 1999 to 444 square kilometers (171.43 square miles). Since 1999, Croatian officials have refocused their demining efforts from housing and streets to infrastructure, agriculture and land allocated for refugee return.

With every passing year, the amount of contaminated land in Croatia decreases. During 2003, 7,680 anti-personnel mines, 4,481 anti-vehicle mines and 43,922 items of UXO were found. In the same year, \$42.7 million (U.S.) was spent on mine action. Croatia plans to be mine-safe by 2009.

Burke says, "Croatia has 26 different demining organizations and companies with 610 deminers, 123 mine detection dogs and 49 mine clearance machines—the largest mechanical mine clearance capacity in the world."¹ Though these numbers may seem ample, she points out that "at any given time, many of the deminers or machines are idle due to lack of funding."¹ Some of the numerous organizations working in Croatia include those listed below.

Adopt-A-Minefield. To aid in the demining process, Adopt-A-Minefield has created a mine clearance project listing for Croatia that allows various adopters, persons or organizations wishing to fund landmine projects to help fund clearance efforts through "adoption" of mined areas. Adopt-A-Minefield, a supporter of mine clearance in Croatia since 1999, provides an accessible database of information for those who wish to participate. Adopt-A-Minefield has compiled extensive data regarding ongoing and future projects in Croatia and many other countries. In addition, Adopt-A-Minefield has raised and donated nearly \$1.8 million over the last six years for demining in Croatia, clearing 763,074 square

meters (0.13 square mile) of land with an additional 130,000 square meters (0.05 square mile) under clearance and benefiting hundreds of thousands of people living in mine-impacted communities.

Croatian Mine Action Centre. The Croatian Mine Action Centre (CROMAC) was established in 1998 as an umbrella organization with the objective of planning and implementing humanitarian demining along with other mine action activities. Kristina Ikić Baniček from CROMAC specifically lists CROMAC's responsibilities as "coordinating mine action in Croatia, facilitating mine risk education and victim assistance, and advocating [for] the ban of anti-personnel landmines."² She says MRE activities are "aimed at preventing mine incidents prior to a complete removal of mines. ... The most vulnerable groups are identified and special programs are designed for them."²

According to Baniček, "The plan for demining the Croatian territory is based on counties' needs and requests, defined mined and mine-suspected areas, and analysis of the area to be demined in accordance with the available financial resources."² CROMAC improves the status of demining operations by collecting and analyzing mine and UXO contamination data as well as maintaining a demining database. Keeping a record with current updates allows officials to plan a more detailed strategy to excavate landmines and UXO.

Norwegian People's Aid. With funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) has facilitated a mine action program in Croatia since September 2001. NPA headquarters is located in Benkovac, one of the most heavily mined areas of Croatia. The mine action program recruits and trains Croatian deminers to work in one of the three demining groups active in Croatia. After two months of basic training, recruits must undergo a rigorous medical exam and pass a cumulative test. In addition to clearance, NPA conducts mine risk education (MRE) operations. Since 2002, NPA has educated Croats about the dangers of landmines through events such as the Zagreb Film Festival, an MRE show on Croatian television using characters from a children's program, and a holy mass in the church of Gornji Zemunik devoted to the problem of mine contamination. NPA's ultimate goal is to enable the existing and returning populations of southern and northwestern Croatia to have a life free from the threat of mines and UXO.

Roots of Peace. Since 1999, Roots of Peace has worked in Croatia by transforming minefields into productive farmland. Demining and rebuilding efforts have been focused on various towns such as Dragalić, Čista Mala and Čista Velika. In Dragalić, the school, post office, dairy processing plant and farm cooperative were turned into battle areas during the war. When residents returned after the cease-fire, they found their community threatened by landmines and UXO. With dona-

tions from the U.S. wine industry, Roots of Peace organized demining efforts and restored farmland for cultivation. Similarly, in the villages of Čista Mala and Čista Velika, Roots of Peace collaborated with the U.S. Department of State, U.S. embassy and the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victims Assistance to clear landmines from over 100 acres of fertile agricultural land in both villages. Heidi Kuhn, founder of Roots of Peace says, "We hope to restore some of the magic that once existed in this bountiful area along the panoramic Danube River. The removal of landmines allows families to reclaim their land and avoid the lethal harvest of mines."³

Survivor Assistance

Unlike many other countries with landmine problems, Croatia has a public health system with plentiful clinics, hospitals and rehabilitation centers. Ambulances are readily available with first aid to transport victims a short distance to local hospitals. There are 12 hospitals in Croatia focusing on physical rehabilitation. Additionally, four medical facilities specialize in fitting landmine survivors with prostheses. These victims and other amputees only pay for services that exceed a predetermined amount set by the Croatian Health Insurance Institute and other national standards. The Croatian government aids its citizens monetarily and by providing amputees with artificial limbs.

Conclusion

With continuing progress and detailed records available for public scrutiny, Croatia is well on its way to becoming mine safe. Concerning financial support for further mine action, Burke says, "While government support for mine action has increased and is now an impressive 57 percent of the total mine action budget, Croatia still depends on international support for demining."¹ Well in advance of the Mine Ban Convention's four-year deadline, Croatia destroyed 199,003 anti-personnel mines in 2002. This Croatian government is dedicated to resolving the country's landmine problem. Encouraged by her government's action, Baniček says, "In October 2000, the Croatian parliament passed the National Mine Action Program, determining the objective: to demine the Croatian territory by the year 2009."² ♦

See "References and Endnotes" on page 107

Contact Information

Sarah Sensamaust
Mine Action Information Center
E-mail: maic@jmu.edu

Heidi Kuhn
Roots of Peace
1299 Fourth Street, Suite 200
San Rafael, CA 94901
USA
Tel: (415) 455-8088
E-mail: heidi@rootsofpeace.org