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ITF ENHANCING HUMAN SECURITY IN SERBIA

by Gregor Sančanin [ITF Enhancing Human Security]

ITF Enhancing Human Security has worked in Southeast Europe's (SEE) post-conflict countries since 1998. In states affected by the break-up of Yugoslavia such as Serbia, ITF works to support the country's fulfillment of the *Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention* (APMBC), and this involvement has proved critical to Serbia fulfilling its goals.¹

With a history of nationalistic antagonisms, a series of armed conflicts, secessions, and major political and state structural reforms stemming back to the turn of the 20th century, the history of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and Serbia is a long and convoluted one, intertwined with religious and ethnic tensions.



ITF deminers at work in Ravno Bučje, Bujanovac.
All images courtesy of ITF Enhancing Human Security.

Historical Context

After WWII, the territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia came under socialist rule, first as Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, and then in 1963 as the SFRY, a socialist federation made up of the republics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. By the early 1990s, ethnic tensions dissolved into armed conflicts, as Croatia, Slovenia, the Republic of Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina seceded from the SFRY.^{2,3} In 1992, Serbia and Montenegro formed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), and later transformed into the state union of Serbia and Montenegro.⁴ Since 2006, Montenegro and Serbia are separate independent states.⁵

All six former republics have become independent states. However, many of these states, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, have some of the heaviest concentrations of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) in the world. Serbia, which is contaminated with cluster munitions and continues to struggle with landmine contamination, is the focus of this article.⁶ Issues relating to humanitarian demining in Serbia are numerous, and progress toward a resolution of the mine problem largely depends on the provision of adequate donor funds.^{7,8}

Cluster Munitions

During the 1999 bombing, the NATO alliance dropped cluster bombs in 16 municipalities in the Republic of Serbia, namely Niš, Kraljevo, Brus, Preševo, Bujanovac, Kuršumljija, Raška, Gadžin Han, Tutin, Sjenica, Čačak, Vladimirci, Knić, Stara Pazova, and Sopot.⁹⁻¹¹

During and immediately after the bombing, the armed forces and police conducted clearance of unexploded cluster munitions from the surface, which substantially contributed to the safety of civilians and reduced the number of victims, specifically children. Numerous cluster munitions were deeply embedded in the ground and could not be initially detected, removed, or destroyed at the time, which is why surveys and clearance are presently needed to reduce the threat of explosive hazards for the local population.

Thus far, in accordance with the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS), 11.25 sq km (4.34 sq mi) has been checked and cleared in the municipalities of Niš, Sjenica, Gadžin Han, Stara Pazova, Knić, Brus, Raška, Kraljevo, Užice, Čačak, Vladimirci, Kraljevo, Sopot, and Preševo, while it is suspected that cluster munitions can still be found in the 2.5 sq km (0.97 sq mi) area around various locations in the municipalities of Sjenica, Tutin, Raška, Bujanovac, and Niš.¹²⁻¹⁴ Many of the cluster munition clearance project tasks were

conducted in highly-populated urban areas, such as in the city of Niš (e.g., the primary school Dušan Radović, Niš city-hospital grounds, Duvanište city-residential area, and the city's industrial zone), as well as in the Kopaonik National Park and Mountain Resort.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

Mines

During the 1990s, the Serbian Armed Forces placed landmines along the border with Croatia (Šid municipality, including Morović and Jamena). Even though there were no major military operations in this particular area, the minefields were placed for preventive purposes.

In accordance with the ITF mandate, a mine action unit from INTERSOS, an Italian NGO committed to assisting the victims of natural disasters and armed conflicts, carried out a broader assessment of the landmine/UXO problem in FRY in 2001. The assessment was collaborative and conducted with the FRY Federal Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia.

After obtaining the relevant information, the Mine Action Centre of Serbia (MACS), in cooperation with ITF, organized a specific survey of the suspected hazardous areas (SHA) in the villages of Jamena, Morović, and Batrovci (Municipality of Šid), estimated to be 10 sq km (3.86 sq mi). Consequently it was established that minefields, which included both anti-personnel and anti-tank mines totaled an area of 5.9 sq km (2.28 sq mi).¹⁸ These areas were surveyed by MACS and cleared by demining companies through ITF between 2003 and 2009. There were a total of 44 project tasks, 5,139 various types of mines and other UXO were detected, removed, and destroyed.^{19,20} Along the borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, there are no more minefields on the Serbian side, and these areas are now safely used by the local population.²¹

Post-clearance Effect on Demined Land in Šid

Šid municipality consists of 18 large villages and towns with over 30,000 residents, including Morović village and Jamena village. This entire region of northwest Serbia is known for extremely fertile soil and high-quality forests, where mines directly obstructed agricultural development.^{20,22}

The impact that minefield clearance had on this region was immediate. The agricultural land and forests were demined (declared mine free by MACS) and handed over to local communities for safe use. Mine clearance of this area offered great socio-economic potential for the region and its residents, which was hindered for many years due to mine fields.

Ongoing Clearance

In late 2009, the MACS obtained information about SHAs in the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac, and Kuršumljija in south-central Serbia.²³ A survey of the area was conducted from 2009 to 2011 by Norwegian People's Aid through ITF, where it was established that at that time, there were 10 confirmed hazardous areas (CHA) in the municipalities of Bujanovac and Preševo, totaling approximately 3.5 sq km (1.35 sq mi).²⁴⁻²⁶

Since 2012, and with the support of ITF and its donors, these areas are progressively being demined and resurveyed. In 2018, with the



Items found at Lučane, Bujanovac.



Explosive item found at Bujanovac, Topolska Malhala.

financial support of the Republic of Serbia, Republic of Korea, and the United States, five project locations in the Municipality of Bujanovac totaling 623,020 sq m (745,126 sq yd) of land was demined and released, removing 29 mines and 1,347 pieces of UXO. By early 2019, 1.8 million sq m (2.15 million sq yd) of SHAs/CHAs remained to be technically treated and demined. In addition to Japan, the same 2018 donors have committed funding for 2019.

Post-clearance in Bujanovac

Bujanovac municipality consists of 58 large settlements, villages, and towns with approximately 40,000 residents. The southern regions of Serbia already struggle with underdevelopment, a lack of jobs, and the population migrating north toward Belgrade or emigrating. In such situations, the mined areas present an even heavier burden to the local population and also obstruct even minimal investments and development. South-central Serbia has excellent climate conditions and fertile soil. In normal conditions, the predominantly agriculturally-oriented local population would use every portion of land possible.

The impact of mine clearance in Bujanovac was immediate. The agricultural land, which was demined, declared mine-free by MACS, and handed over to local communities for safe use, was used immediately by the local population for agriculture, wood/forest exploitation, forest-fruits picking, cattle breeding, etc. Demining this entire region would ensure enhanced human security, enable better socio-economic development, as well as attract potential foreign investments.

Serbia and Treaty/Convention Obligations

The Republic of Serbia acceded to the APMBMC on 18 September 2003 (entered into force 1 March 2004).²⁷ Initially, this committed Serbia to destroy all anti-personnel mine stockpiles by 2008 and to clear all mine-contaminated areas by 2014.²⁸ Serbia later requested and received a five-year mine clearance extension of 1 March 2019. When it became clear that they also would not be able to meet the new deadline, it submitted a second extension request on 14 March 2018. On 30 November 2018, at the 17th Meeting of States Parties to the APMBMC in Geneva, Switzerland, the Republic of Serbia was granted an extension of four years (until 1 March 2023). The extension request includes a substantive plan, thorough year-by-year operational goals, and defined milestones.^{29,30}

Serbia did not sign and is not a State Party to the *Convention on Cluster Munitions* (CCM), even though it played an important role in the Oslo Process that produced this convention. At the political level, Serbia supports the CCM's humanitarian objectives. While Serbia has participated in several CCM meetings, it has stated that it cannot consider accession until its stocks of cluster munitions are destroyed.³¹

Donors and ITF Support

The MACS was established in 2002 as an organizational unit of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs after a proposal by ITF to the federal government of Serbia. Since the inception of MACS, ITF has provided continuous support through technical equipment, vehicles, training, and administrative assistance.

Since 2002, ITF has raised almost US\$25 million from various countries for activities in Serbia including mine clearance, cluster

munition clearance, battle area clearance, training, equipment, and structural support to national capacities (i.e., MACS). With generous donor support through ITF, over 13.65 sq km (5.27 sq mi) of land on 91 projection locations has been cleared and released, with almost 7,200 explosive items (mines, cluster munitions, UXO) removed.

Serbia remains committed to resolving the mine problem, continuously contributing its own funds for activities of mine clearance for the past three years.³²

Post-clearance Effect

The impact of mine, cluster munition, and other UXO clearance in Serbia is always immediate. By clearing and declaring any type of previously-affected land as free of contamination, Serbia can hand over land to the local population for immediate use. Clearance of the contaminated areas unlocks great socio-economic potentials for the country's regions and its residents.

Conclusion

Serbia's experience highlights the importance of a collaborative, multinational approach to explosive hazards clearance. Despite the history of clashes and ethnic rivalry within and among the states of SEE, the impact of landmines, ERW, and UXO often crosses political and socio-economic lines and can contribute to regional destabilization. Ultimately, as Serbia continues to develop via socio-economic and infrastructural reforms, any portion of land that cannot be used safely is a wasted opportunity for local residents. To this end, ITF is determined to continue its work in SEE, coordinating mine action activities, victim assistance, and mine risk education projects with respect to national and regional goals. However, in order for Serbia to achieve APBMC obligations, continuous donor support is crucial. The mine action process is vital for all spheres of daily life as well as the local and national development strategy. ©

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