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THE MINE FREE SARAJEVO PROJECT

Background photo of Grbavica, a suburb of Sarajevo, in March 1996.
Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.

By Marija Trlin [Mine Detection Dog Center], Elise Becker [Marshall Legacy Institute], and Nataša Uršič [ITF-Enhancing Human Security]

Mine Free Sarajevo is one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's most important land release projects of the last decade. By the beginning of 2021, the project aims to clear Sarajevo and its surrounding municipalities of Vogošća, East Stari Grad, Stari Grad, and Novi Grad of landmines.

Multiple partners are working together as part of the *Mine Free Sarajevo* project, implementing mine clearance operations, coordinating activities, and promoting the project. ITF Enhancing Human Security (ITF) is the prime grantee managing all clearance, media, and coordination activities. The Mine Detection Dog Center (MDDC) in Bosnia and Herzegovina is serving as the project clearance operator, deploying manual deminers, equipment, and other key personnel to conduct clearance activities. The Marshall Legacy Institute (MLI) is serving as project facilitator, providing monitoring and evaluation and promoting it through media and public relations activities. The work is funded by the United States.

Mine Free Sarajevo was launched on 4 April 2019 at Sarajevo City Hall, where Sarajevo Mayor Abdulah Skaka hosted US Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina Eric Nelson, municipality mayors, project partners, and representatives of the media to announce the beginning of the field operations. The project is a major step toward freeing Bosnia and Herzegovina from its legacy of war and allowing citizens to focus on the future. Additionally, the project is significant in that its clearance activities cross entity borders and are connecting both the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Bosnia and Herzegovina is the most mine-contaminated country in Europe. According to data from the Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Center (BHMIC), the total size of suspected hazardous areas (SHAs) in the country is approximately 1,000 square kilometers or 1.97 percent of its total surface area. A general assessment of the impact of mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO)—including cluster munitions—in 129 cities and municipalities in the country identified that around 1,400 communities are affected by these items. The contaminated micro-locations directly affect the safety of more than half a million inhabitants, which is around 13 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's total population.¹

This hidden danger has very real consequences. Since the end of the war, 1,149 people have been injured and 617 people have died as a result of mine accidents as of the end of 2019. Many of them were deminers—since the start of humanitarian demining operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1996 there have been 133 demining accidents with fifty-three deminers killed and eighty injured through the end of 2019.



Deminer removing a mine sign in Trebevic.
All images courtesy of ITF.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LAND RELEASE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Mine Free Sarajevo utilizes land release, which is widely recognized as a cost-effective and safe way to release large SHAs by combining technical and non-technical survey and clearance methods. After more than two decades since mine action started in Bosnia and Herzegovina, efforts now focus largely on implementing land release projects. Tarik Šerak, who has been a specialist for the BHMIC since 1997 and is currently the head of the organization's mine action department, is one of the professionals responsible for introducing this method and presenting it to the key players in mine action in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Tarik and BHMIC began using land release in 2011, after being tasked to find improved and more efficient methods of addressing large mine-contaminated areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The pilot project was introduced in 2013, when the organization was involved in implementing new land release methods as defined by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD).² Guided by the recommendations and the framework provided by International Mine Action Standards (IMAS),³ BHMIC created national land release procedures and standards in cooperation with GICHD specialists.

BHMIC officially adopted three chapters of the national mine action standards that are harmonized with the IMAS, and later added two more chapters of standard operating procedures addressing non-technical survey and monitoring as well as quality control of land-release tasks. The process of creating national standards is ongoing, as they are being revised and updated with new information and experiences. Gradually, the country's government and non-governmental organizations have started working according to the newly adopted methods.

The concept of land release is focused on starting with confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs) and expanding the search until there is no longer evidence of mine contamination.² Ideally, land release project areas should have a minimum size of two million square meters because the concept is to connect all the remaining and relatively small pieces of SHAs into one larger area that can then be released by technical and non-technical methods to communities for their safe use. The advantage of this method is that the majority of SHAs are treated by non-technical methods, additional analysis, and data collection in the field, while the technical methods are used only for CHAs. The situation in the field varies from one case to another in Bosnia and Herzegovina. BHMIC usually calculates up to 8 percent of the total size of the land release project to be treated with technical methods, because only 2–3 percent of the territory in land release projects is typically contaminated with mines and UXO. All of these are recommendations provided in the operational plan. However, any additional data obtained are analyzed jointly by BHMIC and MDDC, and are taken into account in order to achieve the goal of land release. All of these are recommendations from the operational plan. Demining teams first start with a targeted investigation of locations and then proceed with a systematic investigation until there is no longer evidence or information of potential danger. IMAS defines targeted investigation as “the investigation during technical survey of certain areas within a SHA/CHA that are more likely to contain mines/ERW.” IMAS further



Deminer in a search lane.

defines a systematic investigation as “a systematic process of applying technical survey in a SHA/CHA. It is typically used where there are no areas within the SHA/CHA that are more likely to contain mines/ERW, than others.”⁴

The final step in each land release project is a jointly signed declaration, in which all parties, including the municipality as the final user, accept that all efforts have been made and the area is safe to be released to the community. The communication between the implementing organization (MDDC), the national authority (BHMIC), and the mine-affected community is especially important in land release. The community, as the final user of the land, needs to be confident that the project was successfully completed, and that the area is safe for use.

LAND RELEASE AND THE MINE FREE SARAJEVO PROJECT

The *Mine Free Sarajevo* project consists of several land release tasks, which include SHAs and CHAs in four municipalities in the Sarajevo region. Some municipalities have one, while others have two or even three land release projects to implement in order to make them mine-free. Field operations started in the Municipality of Stari Grad in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the project will be completed when the Municipality of Vogošća, also in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is cleared.

Created by BHMIC, each land release project has its own operational plan, which consists of a set of detailed documents issued to



Map courtesy of Google Earth.

MDDC as the field implementing partner. These operational plans are working documents that contain maps and photos, available mine-field records, points of entry for the demining teams, interviews with informants, and other important technical details and requirements. MDDC as an organization implementing field activities needs to take into consideration all relevant information, including interviewing reliable informants, and perform technical survey of the designated area and clearance activities. The end result is an entire area released for safe and productive use.

THE MUNICIPALITY OF VOGOŠĆA IN THE FEDERATION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Of the four municipalities covered by *Mine Free Sarajevo*, Vogošća is among the most mine-affected. The mayor of Vogošća, Edin Smajić, is committed to the goal of making his municipality mine-free. The commitment and involvement of local authorities, as well as the cooperation with all stakeholders involved in the demining process, is extremely important for its success. The mine situation in the Vogošća area can be characterized as complex. During the war, Vogošća found itself on two confrontation lines running through settlements and the industrial complex, lines that also moved closer to the neighboring Municipality of Ilijaš and left behind significant contamination.

After the war, a large number of inhabitants of the municipality lived in constant danger posed by mines. From 1996 to 2019, as many as seventy-five demining projects were completed in the municipality, clearing a total area of 1,663,864 square meters through technical survey and other methods. The *Mine Free Sarajevo* project, along with another US-funded project, *Land Release Project Kremeš*, will allow for an additional release of 5,767,165 square meters of land. These numbers illustrate how demining operations have accelerated via new approaches to releasing SHAs.

I was born and raised in Sarajevo, and to me this project means a lot. Sarajevo is a city with many different cultures and nationalities. When the project is fully completed, and the goal of Sarajevo Free of Mines finally becomes a reality, we will be able to live and move without the fear of being injured by mines, live together and leave the past behind us. I am a mine survivor and I live [a] life with disability due to mines. I would be the happiest person if my country one day becomes free of mines.

~ Selma Gušo, mine survivor, MLI Survivors' Assistant Award recipient for her work empowering fellow women survivors.

When Vogošća becomes a mine-free community, numerous development opportunities will open up, ranging from a boosted economy in the old industrial zone to tourism in the rural areas. Opportunities for housing construction are also opening up, as well as the construction of local roads, which are a precondition for any further development. In communities that have been directly endangered, the safety and possibility of using and enjoying locations that were previously inaccessible is slowly but surely returning.



Mayor Edin Smajić.

Mayor Edin Smajić emphasizes the importance of clearing SHAs, noting that residents, farmers, hikers, cyclists, and others have repeatedly encountered risky areas in their daily activities and have had to organize their lives and pursuits with this threat in mind. All of this was a particular burden for the protection and rescue organizations, given that the danger of mine incidents was present for over two decades. The mayor also emphasized development projects that were stalled due to contamination in Vogošća.

The Mine Free Sarajevo project is something that has really facilitated and accelerated all of our efforts so far and we have finally seen the end—or the crown—of all of our demining activities: Vogošća free of mines as part of the entire project. Something that certainly makes everyone proud, especially me as the Mayor, is the final return and putting into operation of the former SHAs. The development of our local community continues. I express my sincere gratitude to the donor in the realization of this project—the United States of America.

~ Edin Smajić, Mayor of Vogošća

THE MUNICIPALITY OF EAST STARI GRAD IN REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

The mayor of East Stari Grad, Bojo Gašanović, also takes pride in this project, noting that it is a highlight of his years-long mandate in office. East Stari Grad spreads along the longest borderline between the two entities making up Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. Since 1996, there have been twenty different demining tasks completed in this municipality, releasing a total of 500,000 sq m of land. The *Mine Free Sarajevo* project will now release an additional 500,000 square meters of SHA in this municipality, making it completely mine free.

Currently, many roads in East Stari Grad still travel through the SHAs, and the surrounding households are “trapped” between mine-fields. The municipality also has important development projects that were stopped due to mine contamination, especially industrial and tourist projects. Resorts and other tourist attractions cannot operate without first resolving the hazard of ERW, including on and around Trebević Mountain; however, part of the mountain remains contaminated with mines.

Soon, Trebević Mountain and the rest of East Stari Grad will be cleared, and the mine warning signs removed, no longer diminishing the natural beauty of the mountain or causing fear and anxiety among visitors. Mayor Gašanović is proud to be part of this positive success story and happy to finally be able to say to local residents that they will soon be able to live safely.

When I heard about the Mine Free Sarajevo project initiative and the implementation of land release projects in four municipalities, I felt true happiness. The city I love and live in will finally be safe. Our mountains will be safe and I love these mountains. I am grateful...to everyone involved in this project.

~ Mirsad Mirojević, mine survivor, Director of the Sitting Volleyball Club Fantomi in Sarajevo

CONCLUSION

Vogošća and East Stari Grad are just two municipalities that will be mine-free by the end of the *Mine Free Sarajevo* project. The completion of this project will further spur interest in clearance and land release activities focused on making all of Bosnia and Herzegovina mine-free. Therefore, the project has even more far-reaching consequences: the productive use of once-contaminated land and social and economic development. However, above all else, the project will allow its residents to live safely. The impact of humanitarian mine action in the country is truly enormous. ©

See endnotes page 65

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Marija Trlin has worked in mine action for twenty years, first at the Donor Relations Department at Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Center, and since 2003 at the Mine Detection Dog Center (MDDC) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Currently, she is a project manager for mine victims assistance and mine risk education projects, and public and donor relations within MDDC. Trlin holds a university degree from the faculty of Graphic Arts from the University of Zagreb, Croatia. She has published many mine-action related articles in local and international publications.

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