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Notes from the Field: Bosnia

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One day not long ago, just as the sun was setting on the city of Doboj, Serb Republic, Jovica Mirkov stepped on a Yugoslav-made PMA-2 anti-personnel mine and lost a foot. Some call him "lucky," it was only a foot, and he will sometimes agree. His misery would have been so much greater had he limped his way home from the hospital in which she lay close to death. "I was not aware of what had happened and stupid thoughts ran through my mind. Like 'What happened to the cow?' Unbelievable! At the moment, though, it seemed like the most natural question in the world."

With regard to landmines in Doboj, one thing is certain. The end of the problem is nowhere in sight. This has not prevented people from returning to the city, however; whether in search of a house to live in or to recapture a memory of home. Many people would also like to return to Skipovac, a farming community 20 miles from Doboj, but there are few homes to claim and, more-importantly, no fields to plow safely. Without land for growing corn and vegetables, there is no income and no food. Then there is the matter of school for the children. The schoolhouse itself may be safe, but the surrounding area and even the playgrounds are mined. Skipovac's front lines changed so often, in fact, that it is difficult to define any safe areas with certainty.

"We have no choice but to live here," says Nedeljko Zoric, who was born in the village and never left. "So my children have to walk to school in Sjenina every day, 30 minutes each way. They go through mined areas to get there, and frankly I'm terrified. My children are aware of mines and can recognize every single type. I taught them everything I know, but what happens when they're with other children who don't realize the danger? I'm always worried when they go in a group, which is every day. If one of the kids in the group activates a PROM-1 mine, for example, that's a bounding fragmentation mine, well, it would kill or injure everyone standing around him. All it takes to activate it is pulling the tripwire, which looks like any other wire." Zoric points out that various agencies have visited the village and promised that help would arrive but says, "Sometimes I am scared that it will come too late." In a way, he says, "it is like prison. You have no freedom of movement, no options. You can plow a field or two, but if you need more land, you can't have it because it may not be safe. If you need more income, you can cut wood, but you could get killed doing it. If you want to repair the school, you're welcome to take on the job, but you could die in the yard."

If nothing changes, the handful of other families with school-age children will decide to leave Skipovac, and eventually, Zoric admits, he will also. 

All that would remain are a few elderly people and bad memories. Under such conditions, who would want to return?

**Luca Brcko**

Not many years ago, the town of Luca Brcko was as essential to the life of the region as the heart is to the body. Today, this Sava river port is essentially lifeless. A town of ghosts. The Sava separates Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Republic of Croatia, and during the fighting that erupted in 1991, combattants on both sides of the river saw anti-personnel mines as an easy way to protect themselves from "the enemy." It did not help the clean-up that the city's status was left unresolved in the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina of 1995. Becko was recently designated a "self-standing district" of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but little else has changed.

Ask former post worker Sreten Simic about Becko's problems, and he says that they are probably...
no worse than in other areas, just different. The long and short of it, though, is that no one feels safe, and they have little to look forward to. Bezic's residents and would-be returnees dream about the past. What steps must be taken before the city can contemplate a future? "For one thing, demining both sides of the Sava, from west to east," says Simic. "After all, what's the use of clearing down river if mines remain upriver? Sadly, nobody says anything about this project."

One type of anti-personel mine used freely by combatants in the Sava region, the PMA-3, a presure operated blast mine, will give deminers particu­lar trouble. Constructed entirely of plastic, it eludes a metal detector and cannot be safely neutralized. Occasionally, the sound of an ambulance breaks the peace. "Occasionally, the sound of an ambulance breaks lar trouble. Constructed entirely of plastic, it eludes a metal detector and cannot be safely neutralized. Occasionally, the sound of an ambulance breaks the peace. Simic speculates, or a curious child investigating the unknown. "I think of my own children," he says, "I was not as frightened during the war itself." Lastly, reports Simic, he has thought a lot about leaving. "But where to go? It's no better anywhere else."

The Zvornik-Srebrenica Power Line
Zvornik, a medium-sized town in the eastern part of the Serb Republic is located on the Drina River, which forms the republic's border with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. A bridge links the neighbors. In fact, it is not only the bridge that links them. The main power supply for the eastern part of the Serb Republic and for adjacent areas of Yugoslavia originates in a hydroelectric power plant down river at Vljeograd; a thermoelectric plant at Ugljevik is another important source of power.

During the war the Vljeograd plant sustained extensive damage, and so did the system of power lines between Zvornik and Srebrenica, about 30 miles south of Zvornik, through which the electricity feeds into homes, factories and public works. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia supplied some resources for reconstructing Vljeograd after the war, since Serb Republic wasn't up to the job itself, but the system of power lines will not last for long without maintenance and some major repairs. Demining, an expensive proposition, is a precondition for the entire undertaking. "We were very happy when they finally started to work [on the repairs]," says Ilja Javorac, who lives in a half-reconstructed house with no electricity in the nearby village of Dmna. "The municipal authorities promised that electricity will come to our village, but nothing actually was going on. Then one day they came and started working on one of the [utility] poles in the hills. It looked promising, but we were afraid because we knew that it is the area where fighting took place. And then it happened. They hit a mine and one man, Dragan Stankovic, got killed ... I felt guilty, my mouth was dry and strong pain was eating my stomach."

Demining in Serb Republic requires internation­al funding. A few local agencies, managed by local staff, receive support from international demining programs but must vie for funds with other countries in need. It has been the government's plan to establish its own demining capacity, but its moves in this direction have not been successful as of yet. In the absence of progress on demining and repairing the power lines, Javorac and his family have had to make a difficult decision. Should they live in their own house without electricity or take over someone else's house where there is electricity but also the constant fear of being ejected by the owners, who could return any day. Javorac notes that the lack of electricity also translates into a lack of running water. Since there is no local water system, the water for each house must be pumped from the family well. No electricity, no pump. Javorac points out. "Now we have to pull [the water] out manually from the well, like our parents did when they were young." Area residents used to make jokes about it, he reports. "Just like the good old days!" Javorac goes on to say that, as he and his neighbors spend more and more time with­out modern, electric powered appliances for cooking, washing and ironing, they have the feeling of "traveling backwards in time and of being unable to do anything about it."

Javorac realizes the immensity of the task ahead. "It is not only a matter of a few minor repairs," he says, "but actually a whole system of utility poles and wiring. And that costs a lot, not to mention the demining that will have to be done before anything else." Obviously, he says, "we understand that it will not happen overnight, but we would be very grateful if we knew that it will ever happen."

During the war, military leaders of both sides found it easier to protect large swaths of land by sowing mines than by stationing soldiers. Local people used mines to obtain the same type of protection for themselves. Anti-tank mine fields dominate the region, combined with anti-personnel mines and oft­en booby traps. Nobody kept records of their mine laying. Although some of them remember the location, nobody can tell for sure. Furthermore, the line separating the sides, usually the area of heaviest mining, moved several times, but you never know from where to where.

Javorac showed us one well-marked location where, close to the road, you can actually see an anti­tank mine that turned up during the demining op­eration, a round, plastic TMMP 6 with 11.24 lbs of TNT that can be activated by 3.30 lbs of pressure. The explosion of such a mine is so powerful that it can penetrate two inches of armor at 31-inch range.

The neutralizing of this mine is a very sensitive op­eration, a job only for experts. As with most of the mines placed in the country, it was made in Yugoslavia.

So many mines have been scattered, and they are being cleared at such a slow pace, that it is difficult