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Darvin Lisica
BHMAC

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Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Problem: Priority Setting

With so many tasks to complete and limited resources with which to complete them, the importance of priority setting to mine action cannot be overstated. The author describes how priority setting relates to mine action in Bosnia and Herzegovina and suggests how to go about setting such priorities.

by Darvin Lisica, BHMAC Deputy Director

Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action

Bosnia and Herzegovina minefield information is not completely accurate. There are 18,609 mine field records in the Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Centre (BHMAC) database, but 25 percent of these records are believed to be partially incorrect and up to 40 percent are not available. The suspected risk area in Bosnia and Herzegovina is estimated to be at least 2,169 sq km, which is some 4.3 percent of the total Bosnia and Herzegovina territory. Since the beginning of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina there have been 4,798 mine victims,1 1,452 have occurred since the cessation of hostilities; 402 of these were fatalities.

The approval of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Demining Law in February 2002 stimulated the transformation of the entire mine action system, and by the end of 2002, the original complex and disintegrated management structure was integrated into a single BHMAC. As the beginning of 2003, the Council of Ministers adopted the Bosnia and Herzegovina Demining Strategy until 2010. The Strategy is based on the estimated size of the suspected risk area and ways of reducing it in relation to the demining resources in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The estimated financial requirement to fully implement the Strategy is in the order of $333,800,000 (U.S.); most of which should be provided through donations. The high level of dependence on donations was the main reason why a revision of the Strategy was planned for 2004. A second important reason for a revision was the availability of information from the Landmine Impact Survey currently being carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This survey should provide significant new input when it is consolidated and analysed towards the end of 2003.

The humanitarian demining dynamics and flow of funds are insufficient to accomplish the goal, i.e., Bosnia and Herzegovina being free from the effect of mines by 2010. The main reasons for this lack of funds are a deep economic crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina (although the government managed to invest approximately $5,280,000 in 2002, which was four times more than planned) and unexpectedly low funding from donors. This financial reality has brought greater attention to risk management since the beginning of 2003, in conjunction with preparations for more intensive implementation of emergency and permanent marking, mine risk education and technical survey.

Regardless of the fact that all the elements of mine action are in place in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it cannot be expected that such a huge mine problem be resolved quickly and simply. The subject of our research is the mine problem, and within resource management, establishment of the benefit of the affected communities and the registry of mined locations grouped by priority, and development community action plan. Determination of priority level is achieved through qualitative measurement. The basis for applying qualitative prioritization is that it is a means for managing information and reaching the priority level is achieved by dividing the mine problem into more specific problems and their main characteristics. If priority evaluation is looked upon as a part of risk management, then it can be defined as a comparison of priority levels with the previously established criteria for evaluating the contamination problem.2 These criteria may vary from country to country depending on the strategic goals set, country policy, economic situation, resources available and other factors. There are different quantitative methods of multi-criteria analysis for measuring and evaluating risk defined in different software packages, but these shall not be separately addressed in this article.

New Priority-Setting Model to be Developed

"Priority setting is necessary when money, time and staff are limited." This statement clearly defines the nature of the problem that confronts participants in mine action in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The slow pace of humanitarian demining operations frustrates not only the experts, but also the people, the authorities and the donors, all of whom expect visible results in a short time.

The priority-setting model used so far suffered from several disadvantages: there was no finite sequence in the priority list, the procedure for decision making on how to treat the risk was complex, and the final choice was relatively subjective as it is simply difficult to separate the highest priority from a large group of generally important risks.

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Mine action in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a process with a large number of interested parties participating at the same time, often with different and conflicting interests and aims. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a hierarchy within mine action goals. This hierarchy is not only strategic, but also includes the goals and the interests expressed at a lower level, down to the local community. It is at the basic level of the local community that most misunderstandings and subjectivity in priority selection appear. Correct priority setting is a transparent process that may help avoid the choice of areas and activities that will most efficiently reduce the risk and bring benefit to Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is a key factor in influencing the will of the towns to continue supporting mine action in Bosnia and Herzegovina and mine action decision makers must therefore base their decisions upon scientific and unbiased models for risk management.

The current status of mine action, the availability and accessibility of information, the transformation of BHMAC operational management system and new information from the Landmine Impact Survey will all work to open possibilities for developing a new model for mine action priority setting in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This "new model" is the "missing link" between the large scope of work done gathering and assessing information, and planning and taking actions to solve the mine problem. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we now have the chance to do this.

References
1. According to the ICGC information with April 2003 included.
5. "Effectiveness of demining is a constant problem, almost uncontrollable compared to number of mines set. According to some estimations, demining lasts hundreds times slower than mining (International Meeting on Mine Clearance 1995)," taken from Ozenc: The Mine Plague pages 63 and 65.
6. Dr. Dzivad Termiz, Dr. Slavomir Milosavljevic: Uvod u Metodologiju Politikologije, Sarajevo, 1999, page 147.

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Contact Information
Darvin Lisica
BHMAC Deputy Director (Operations)
Zmaj od Bosne 8
71000 Sarajevo
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Tel: +387 33 253800
Fax: +387 66 373311
E-mail: darvin.lisica@bhmac.org
Website: www.bhmac.org

Bosnian Army

Demining in Bosnia With 5 Korpusa of the Bosnian Army

Despite the end to years of brutal fighting in Bosnia, landmines lie left behind from the war still threaten the safety of local populations. The following article gives a firsthand account of a former Canadian soldier's demining experience in Bosnia alongside the Bosnian Army.

By Peter Hindy, Former Canadian Soldier

Introduction

On September 12, 2001, I arrived under guard at work and made my way to the unit of the hill of Cekljek, Bihac, Bosnia. I had a very strange, yet distinct sinking feeling from the tragedies of the terrorist attacks of the previous day. As I walked up the hill, I felt that I would have to somehow prove past the usual morning smile and cheerfulness that I was not personally angry and vengeful at the Muslim world for the actions taken by the poor excuses for soldiers who committed the attacks against the innocent people of New York. As for me, I was contented and these brave men fought for the 5th Corps of the Bosnian Army (BSSW1) and for what they thought was right. They were the finest people I have ever known.

At first, the deminers would not initiate the usual conversation and a few minutes were passed. I explained to the other deminers that it was normal to feel tentative today towards me, a Westerner, as such a terrible thing had happened. After a short period of hesitant conversation, I presented with the following statement, "Now people in America know what it was like to be in my town every day." The remark was not spoken in a hard tone, but rather was relayed in a soft and respectful manner. After all, those men had been surrounded by the fighting in their proud satellite town of Bihac for 1,200 plus days over the wellness period. They had held their own for that entire battle through the good and the bad times. Even though the rest of the town has tried to get back to life after eight years of brutal conflict, these men are still fighting that same battle on the ground they had been in July of 1995 in Cekljek. The Serbs may have been defeated, but the mines are still standing awaiting their victim with patience and stealthy, ruthless dedication. But as in the mines as these mines are, they do nothing to dampen the efforts of the sterile, professional character of the deminers of 5 Korpusa.

Demining in Bihac With 5 Korpusa of the Bosnian Army

"I once heard the world has a landmine problem. Since we are all in the world, we, despite whatever country we are in, have a landmine problem. The truth is not always easy to accept."

-Peter Hindy

BSSW1 Team meets and two partners in crime, relax in the admin area.

Ghosts of the Battlefield

The minefield being cleared here today is one of many laid in 1992 during the conflict. In fact, 60 percent of these mines are unknown and unmarked, and the people who laid them may be living bloody battles to hold just a few hundred yards either way. Men died taking this ground. Sometimes photos, watches and other personal items are found—testaments to what the world allowed to happen here in this country two hours from London. For the men of BSSW1, the war continues as daily from seven AM to two PM in the more than 30°C heat. Sweat, headaches, dirt, lack of proper food and water at times and the never-ending attention to detail to not become complacent amongst the problems we faced. Complicity means death. But still the morale is maintained and life goes on through the good and the bad times in the demining business.

There are many reasons for each man to pay attention to ensure this tough job gets done right—the greatest of which is the human cost of war. I was reminded of the human casualties daily in the distance by the white patch of Bosnian and international volunteer fighters buried on the horizon in the military cemetery, and by the tombstones bearing the names of the dead, such as Vukovar, Laslovo, and Srebrenica. These men paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom, and the nine men of BSSW1 were showing the success of every soldier who died trying to do the right thing. Every day under the gentle wind and thunderous silence of peace, the team carefully advance farther into the ground that had not been ventured on since traces split the air and screaming bombs were not heard. The sound of children's laughter and the hopes for the future from sons of fathers and mothers with animal-like