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Darvin Lisica
Norwegian People's Aid (NPA)

Stuart Maslen
Norwegian People's Aid (NPA)

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Unfinished Business: Cluster Munition Remnants in Kosovo

by Dr. Darvin Lisica and Dr. Stuart Maslen [Norwegian People's Aid]

During the period of June 1999 to mid-December 2001, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) coordinated major international cleanup activities in Kosovo, which resulted in the successful clearance of more than 12.4 sq mi (32.1 sq km) of land and the destruction of more than 50,000 landmines, unexploded submunitions and other unexploded ordnance (UXO). Kosovo had considerable mine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) contamination, including cluster munition remnants (CMR) from armed conflict between forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo Liberation Army in the late 1990s, exacerbated by the NATO bombing in 1999.

Time has shown how much remains to be cleared (and sometimes re-cleared). At the time of the U.N. program's closure on 15 December 2001, 47 task dossiers remained. Despite years of further clearance, a community liaison survey completed by The HALO Trust in 2007 identified 172 mine or ERW clearance tasks.¹ The national authorities, then the Office for the Kosovo Protection Corps Coordinator (OKPCC), advised by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), discounted 42 of these tasks after re-survey. However, HALO's clearance operations in 2009 continued to find contamination in other areas that OKPCC did not

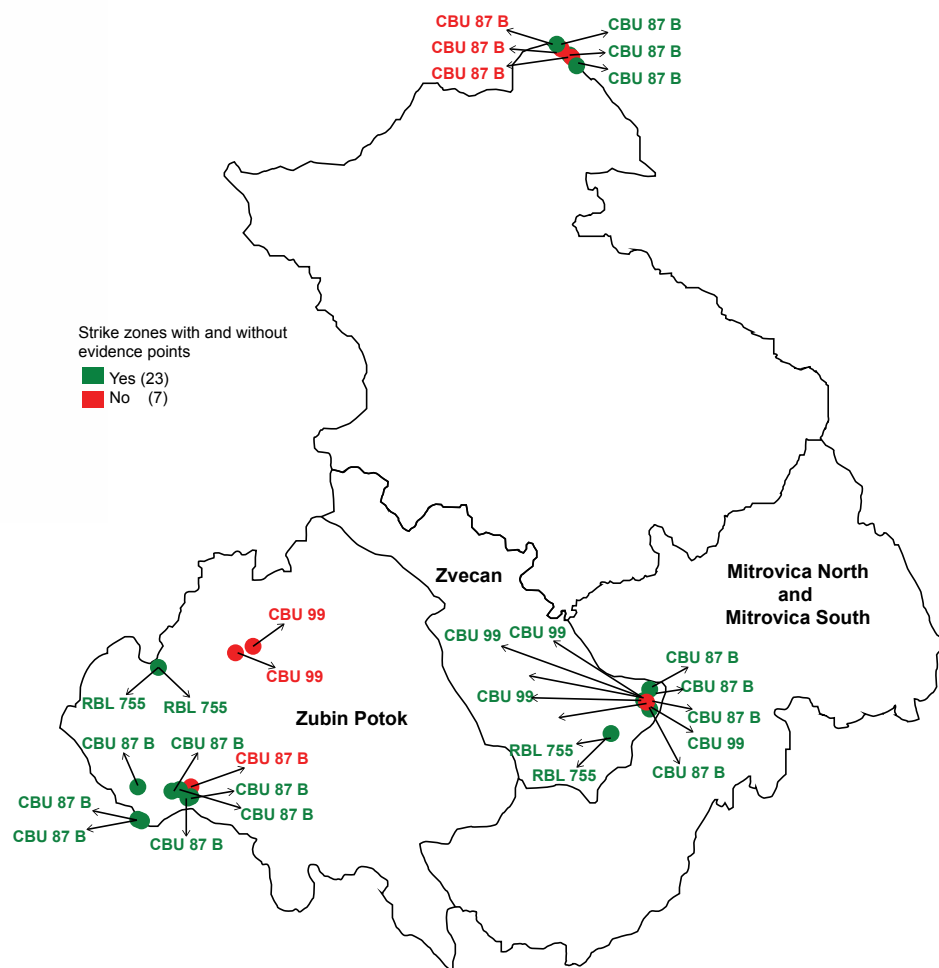


Figure 1. Cluster munition strike zones in northern Kosovo identified by NPA. All graphics courtesy of NPA.

consider dangerous.² By the end of 2014, 128 confirmed hazardous areas (CHA) remained in the IMSMA database held by the Kosovo Mine Action Centre (KMAC), covering a total area of almost 4.1 sq mi (10.6 sq km).³ Of this total, contamination from CMR was strewn across 51 areas covering more than 2.9 sq mi (7.5 sq km), including majority Serb areas in northern Kosovo.^{4,5}

In 2014, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) established a new program in Kosovo and took a careful look at CMR in northern Kosovo (specifically the four municipalities of Leposavić, Mitrovica North, Zubin Potok, and Zvečan). From December



Unexploded BLU-97 submunition at Tovariste in Záža community, Zvečan municipality.

2014 through July 2015, NPA conducted desk study and field-based, non-technical survey (NTS) to assess and confirm CMR contamination. These activities were done in partnership with local authorities and KMAC.

NPA identified cluster munition strikes in nine affected communities across three of the four municipalities (Leposavić, Zubin Potok, and Zvečan). Four types of cluster munitions were identified: CBU-87/B (in three versions, dispersing BLU-97, BLU-97B or BLU-97A/B submunitions), CBU-99 (dispersing MK-118 BL submunitions), BL-755 (dispersing MK-1 submunitions) and RBL-755 (dispersing MK-4 submunitions). Records of unexploded submunitions clearance by the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) were provided to NPA by KMAC, indicating total clearance on four tasks at one location (Mokra Gora) in 1999 and 2006 of some 750,000 sq yards (632,800 sq m)—though it is unclear if these clearance operations were conducted in accordance with international mine action standards.⁶

During this planned clearance, 119 unexploded submunitions were found and destroyed, while KFOR units destroyed 299 additional submunitions in spot tasks after calls from local communities. The majority of these 276 submunitions were found in Žaža community in Zvečan municipality in 2000.

In 2015, KFOR reported the latest incident, a single unexploded submunition in Oklace, Zubin Potok municipality.

Available information suggests that during the bombing campaigns, 83 cluster bombs were dropped at 30 locations within the three municipalities, dispersing a total of 17,041 submunitions. NPA estimated that 1,459 unexploded submunitions remained (8.56 percent of those fired overall), indicating up to 1,000 or more still need to be cleared from almost 9 sq km of land (3.4 sq mi). These figures are in addition to the already significant KMAC estimates of contamination cited previously.

Boljetin is one of the affected communities situated in the southeast of Zvečan municipality, where most of the land is forested or pasture. The community has a population of approximately 350, of whom only about 45 citizens are permanently employed.⁶ Most of the unemployed exploit the forest, use the pasture, or conduct agricultural and orchard work as their main source of income. No data were available on NATO bombing of the community. During NTS, NPA received information from local authorities and from the field that NATO had bombed one location on Sokolica Hill. Municipality authorities confirmed this information, which stated that detonations occurred due to a forest fire in July 2007 north of Sokolica monastery.

Based on information received locally, NPA confirmed two NATO strikes in the community. The local population confirmed they feared entering the area surrounding Boljetin village and Sokolica monastery. The police station in Zvečan was also informed by paragliders that they noticed unexploded submunitions from the air. The total hazardous area is 0.06 sq mi (0.15 sq km) or about 30 soccer fields. NPA estimated that at least two RBL-755 cluster bombs were dropped, dispersing



Unexploded BLU-97 A/B submunition at Crni Krs in Oklace community, Zubin Potok municipality.



A child finds parts of a BLU-97 submunition in Oklace, Zubin Potok municipality.

MK-4 submunitions. NPA estimated that 30 MK-4 submunitions remained for clearance.

Although KFOR emergency interventions reduced the hazard level at certain locations across the region, serious risks for the local population still exist, and risks are growing as local communities in northern Kosovo begin using the land more extensively for economic development. Analysis shows that across northern Kosovo, mountainous areas intended for tourism (a key development potential for the region) amounted to 42.5 percent of the total contamination identified. Agricultural land (24.8 percent) and forests (23.2 percent) are also highly impacted. The remaining impacts were on areas

used or intended for housing, infrastructure, river banks and canals. In total, assessments indicate that 3,872 people are impacted by the presence of unexploded submunitions with 995 people at direct risk of death or injury.

Based on its assessment of the CMR hazard and impact, NPA plans to develop a land-release strategy for contaminated areas across all of northern Kosovo, including areas with Serbian and Albanian majorities. More than 15 years after cluster bombs were dropped, northern Kosovo still faces a major clearance challenge. ©

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Darvin Lisica, Ph.D.

Regional Director Southeast Europe
Norwegian People's Aid
Blagovac 2
Sarajevo, 71000 / Bosnia and Herzegovina
Tel: +387 33 253800
Fax: +387 33 667311
Email: darvin@npaid.org
Website: <http://www.npaid.org>



Darvin Lisica, Ph.D. is the regional director for Southeast Europe at Norwegian People's Aid. He holds a doctorate in security and defence from the University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Darvin is also a lecturer at the University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Political Science, Department for Security and Peace Studies.

Stuart Maslen, Ph.D.

Editor, Mine Action Review
Norwegian People's Aid
200 chemin des Golettes
Chevry, 01170 / France
Email: stuartm@npaid.org
Website: <http://www.mineactionreview.org>



Stuart Maslen, Ph.D. is an international lawyer working for Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) as an editor of the Mine Action Review, published by NPA. He is an honorary professor at the University of Pretoria (South Africa) and holds a doctorate in international humanitarian law as well as master's degrees in international human rights law and forensic ballistics. He has written a commentary of the *Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention* and co-edited a commentary of the *Convention on Cluster Munitions*.