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LANDMINES AND REFUGEES: OUT OF THE FRYING PAN, INTO THE FIRE

Abstract

Since September 2015, when Hungary started to secure its borders with Serbia with militarized razor-wire fences and closing the routes for displaced people, refugees and migrants seeking refuge in European countries are having to find alternative routes to the hope. Their desperation has compelled thousands of them to take long journey through cornfields toward the mine suspected areas in the Serbian-Croatian border. Due to their lack of knowledge about the area and having limited contact with local communities makes them more vulnerable to landmines and unexploded ordinances. On the other hand, being outside of the protection of a state increases the vulnerability. According to the latest reports by Croatian Mine Action Center, “the current status of mine suspected areas in Croatia amounts to 444 km²” Mine suspected areas are contaminated with 43,361 mines and also large number of unexploded ordinances. This study aims to take a comprehensive look at the dangers displaced people face when fleeing through minefields. Surveys, reports and case studies conducted by agencies and international organizations involved in mine action and the protection of refugees, will be analyzed dealing with this tragic problem of landmines and unexploded ordnance.

Keywords: Refugees, Landmines, Unexploded Ordnance, Migration, Croatia

OVERVIEW OF CHALLENGES THAT REFUGEES FACE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS ROUTE

‘When the law and morality contradict each other, the citizen has the cruel alternative of either losing his moral sense or losing his respect for the law’ says French Politician Frederic Bastiat. In this quote Bastiat did not just mention the moral and law, he also mentioned the nature of a war. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, it was not just the rebellion against dictators, it was also struggle not to losing their moral sense and their respect for the natural rights. Some Reformists have partly succeeded some could not. But things never went which are expected by Modern Democracies that supported so-called revolutions. Conflicts were taking lives, destroyed families, and destroyed the law or in other words ruined respect for the law in the Middle East. This hopelessness brought almost 11 million homeless and 6 million refugees who are desiring to have better life and brighter future in Europe, the land of peace and prosperity. However those refugees brought Europe reactionary ideas. Now the pest of unnatural laws and immoral behaviors by former Middle Eastern Pharaohs are spreading through Western Balkans, Central Europe and finally all over the world like a deadly virus.

A news from the Guardian states that ‘After the closure of the Western Balkans route as a result of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, the number of people reaching Greece via the Eastern Mediterranean route drastically decreased. The Central Mediterranean Route from North Africa to Italy has become the primary entry point to Europe.’ (The Guardian, 2017)

Although after the EU-Turkey Statement seems like changed the migration route, it might not be so. After the Agreement, the migration via Central Mediterranean Route has just gone underground and there are still suffers from harsh migrate policies by governments in Eastern Europe.

The Greek-Turkish borderline ‘River Meriç’ is still the most usual land route and Aegean Sea is still most usual sea route for refugees from Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and even Turkey. The coast of River Meriç might be the biggest black market and the most safe harbor for the human traffickers in the East Europe. The bottle water prices start from \$5 to \$15 and bread prices start from \$2 to \$5 which are more than 1000% expensive than Turkish market prices. By those exploitation, Syrian Refugees are still desiring to cross the river however they do not want to get beaten and robbed by Greek Border Police and exiled from Greece, but only 5% of them can successfully pass and head to the Republic of Macedonia via Gevgelija border. On the other hand, Due to the fact that people cannot leave, hundreds of refugees are continuing to arrive every day. Limited infrastructure and capacity of the facilities lead to horrible congestion and many unaccompanied children who are

the most vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and trafficking are paying the heaviest price. According to latest report which was published by the UNICEF in May 2017, at least 300,000 unaccompanied and separated children crossing borders alone have been documented in 80 countries in the years 2015 and 2016.

It is impossible to mention all challenges refugees face here but only a few of them can leave Republic of Macedonia behind and head through the dangerous land mine zone in Croatia, or to the wall in Hungary.

LANDMINES AND REFUGEES

The conflict in Syria has caused the largest refugee crisis of the beginning of 21th century. This crisis has brought the world's attention the frightening risks that refugees face. Landmine and unexploded ordnance are two of them. From the beginning of their long journey to peace, Syrian refugees encounter risks due to landmines or unexploded ordnance contamination in Syria and the minefields along Syria's border with Turkey that had been mined by the Turkish Armed Forces in 1950s. Almost at the end of their long journey to peace, the Europe, this insidious threat welcomes them at the Croatian border where about a million landmines were laid along, during the breakup of former Yugoslavia.

Many landmine and unexploded ordnance victims are, or have been, refugees in the Europe (International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), 2015). The Council of Europe's former Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg has stated that "... in certain areas of Europe, migrants in search of asylum have stepped on mines. They do not see the warning signs when they are trying to cross these contaminated areas during the night" (Child Rights International Network, 2017). Here are two examples that corroborate this statement. In Greece, immigrants made up most of all civilian casualties. 104 Non-national had been killed and another 187 were injured in the border minefields, according to an official from Greek Army Land Minefield Clearance Battalion (International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), 2013). According to national database of mine victims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 948 of 1,846 civilian landmines and unexploded ordnance casualties were returnees, refugees, or IDPs between 1992 and 2009 (Centar za uklanjanje mina u BiH (BHMACH), 2009: 11).

As we highlighted above, for many years, landmines and unexploded ordnance along the borders of some European countries have caused casualties among displaced people. Croatia's border has a potential to be one of those. This study aims to take a comprehensive look at the dangers displaced people face at the door of peace when fleeing to Europe through minefields.

OVERVIEW OF DEMOGRAPHICS OF LANDMINE CASUALTIES

Landmine and unexploded ordnance are two of the most insidious threats to civilians. Peace agreements may be signed, hostile aggression may be ceased but landmines and unexploded ordnance are left behind as the one of the enduring heritages of war. Landmines are explosive devices that are triggered by mostly pressure or movement. They are designed as anti-personnel or anti-tank. Anti-personnel mines are designed to be activated by people and that are often aimed to injure them, while anti-tank mines are intended to defeat vehicles. Unexploded ordnance are explosive weapons that didn't explode when they were used in conflict. Both pose a serious and continuous threat to civilians until they are removed. These explosive devices can be found on roads, footpaths, forests, deserts, agricultural lands or in other places surrounding living areas where people are carrying out their daily routines. Because their locations are unknown, they are invisible and they can remain active long after conflict has ended (Gözübenli, 2016). Although it is easy and cheap to make a landmine because of its simple technology, clearing mines is dangerous, time-consuming and costly work. It costs as little as \$3 to make a landmine (Keeley, 2003: 7). It costs \$300-\$1000 to remove one (Andersson at al., 1995: 718). Until 1999, for every 5,000 mines that are demined, one deminer have been killed and two have been injured. There were 1,675 casualties among deminers since 1999 (International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), 2016a). (See: F-2).

In 84 countries, there are an estimated 110 million landmines still planted in the ground. More than 200,000 km² of the world's surface is contaminated with landmines (Kasban at al., 2010). This area is larger than half of Germany. Despite the inadequate data of collection on landmines and unexploded ordnance incidents, a total of 102,970 landmines and unexploded ordnance casualties (International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), 2016a: 44) have been recorded between 1999-2015 including 26,230 people killed (International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), 2016a), according to the Landmine Monitor 2016, the latest annual monitoring report by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (hereinafter referred to as ICBL). This number does not include the thousands of casualties that go unreported when victims are killed or injured in remote areas, where communication options are limited.

In 1999, there were averages of more than 24 landmines and unexploded ordnance casualties daily. According to the latest monitoring report, there were averages of 17 landmines and unexploded ordnance casualties occurring each day in 2015. Latest statistics shows a sharp increase of 75% from casualties recorded

for 2014 (See: F-1). The reason of this sharp increase can be explained by armed conflicts in Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen.

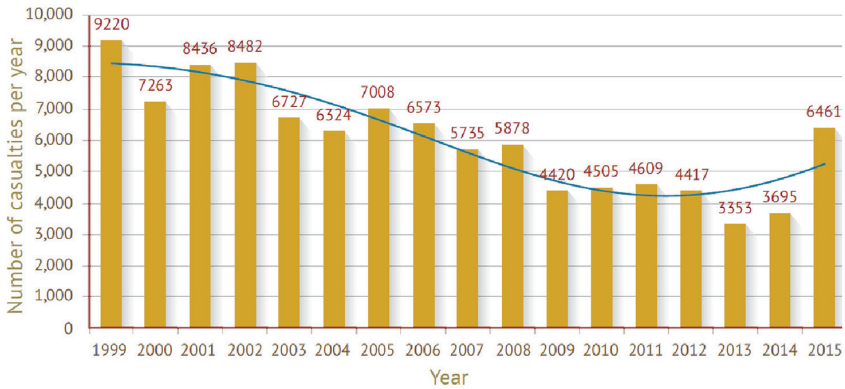


Figure 1: Number of mine/UXO casualties per year (1999–2015) Note. International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), (2016), *Landmine Monitor 2016*. (2016a: 44)

Between 1999 and 2003, the percentage of civilian casualties averaged 81% per year. Since 2005, civilians have represented approximately 73% of casualties for which the civilian status was known (Gözübenli, 2016: 3). Since 1999, civilians have accounted on average for 76.3% of all casualties (See: F-2).

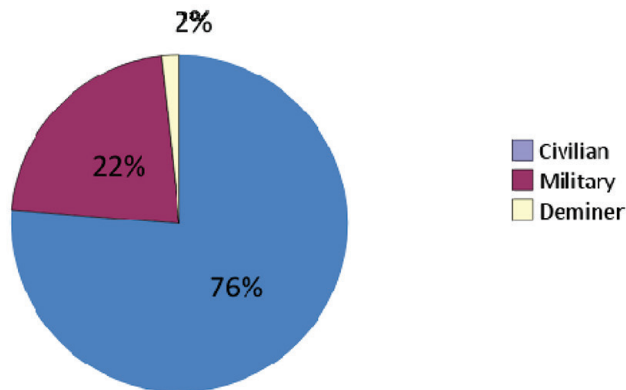


Figure 2: Percentage of mine/UXO casualties by civilian/military status recorded (1999–2015)

11,774 child casualties of a total of 27,990 civilian was recorded (International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), 2016b) since 2005, when systematically collect collecting of age-disaggregated landmines and unexploded ordnance casualty data in began.

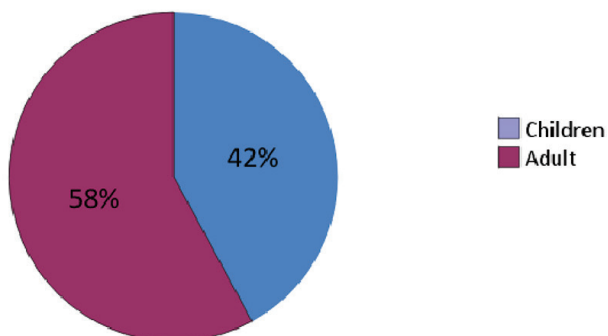


Figure 3: *Percentage of mine/UXO casualties by age (1999–2015)*

INSIDIOUS DANGER AT THE DOOR OF EUROPE

Overview of Mine situation in the Republic of Croatia

According to the latest reports by Croatian Mine Action Center, “the current status of mine suspected areas in Croatia amounts to 444 km²” Mine suspected areas are contaminated with 43,361 mines and also large number of unexploded ordinances left over from the war in former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995 (Croatian Mine Action Centre: CROMAC, 2017). A total of 1,980 landmines and unexploded ordnance casualties, including 512 killed, 31 unknown and 1437 injured, have been recorded in the country since 1999. There are no reliable estimates for the total number of people killed by landmines in Croatia. It’s estimated that more than 300 civilian have been killed by landmines since the 1991-1995 war in former Yugoslavia has ended.



Figure 4: Movement of refugees and migrants through the Balkans. Note. Reprinted from ACAPS (2015), Briefing Note – Balkans: Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Transit, 6 November 2015.

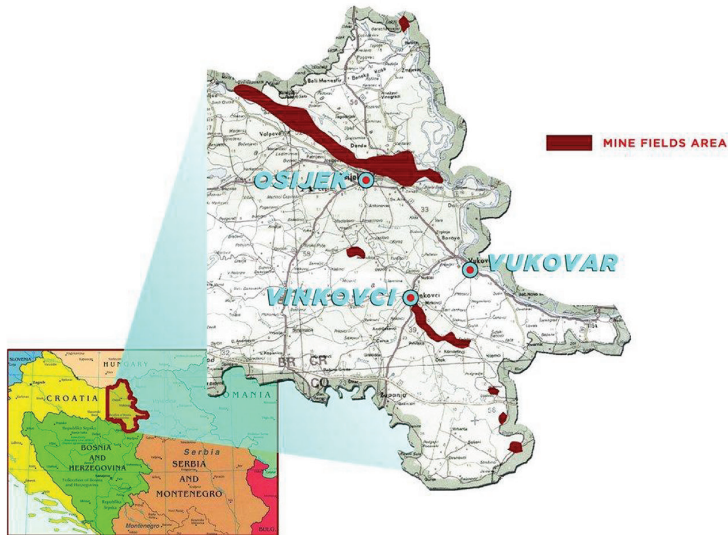


Figure 5: Minefields at Croatian-Serbian border Note. Reprinted from Dear refugees: Welcome to Croatia, retrieved from website welcome.cms.hr

HAZARDS REFUGEES FACE AFTER HUNGARIAN BORDER BARRIER

As stated in the United Nations Mine Action Project Portfolio “*During four years of armed conflict in Croatia, mines were laid by all the warring parties, mainly to protect defensive positions, which changed frequently, but also in areas of strategic importance, such as railway lines, power stations and pipelines,*” (United Nations Mine Action Project, 2017) landmine locations are well marked and are known to the local population. But “*the majority of suspected mined areas are woods and forests followed by agricultural land, underbrush, meadows and pastures.*” (United Nations Mine Action Project, 2017)

After Hungary built a border barrier along its Serbian border, refugees dreaming to reach their target have found a new route to the European countries (See: F-4). Their desperation has compelled thousands of them to take long journey through cornfields toward the mine suspected areas in the Serbian-Croatian border. Just two days after the completion of Hungarian border barrier, on 16 September 2015, Croatia became one of the main transit countries for refugees with about 12,000 entries per day (European Economic and Social Committee, 2016).

A map by the Croatian Mine Action Centre shows a heavily contaminated stretch of eastern Croatia, near Serbia which is the only way for refugees and migrants trying to reach Western Europe (See: F-5). The entire mine suspected area on the territory of the country is marked with 14,018 mine warning signs. This corresponds to one-third of the number of landmines contaminated in the country.

When they flee their own countries due to desperate conditions of conflict, war and poverty, refugees no longer have the protection of their own state. They often lack official recognition as refugees, citizenship status; and adequate documentation to regularize their status. So refugee mine victims are caught this insidious danger outside the protection of the state. On the other hand, lack of knowledge of the area and having little or no contact with more informed local communities make refugees and migrants more vulnerable to landmines and unexploded ordnance.

Landmines and unexploded ordnance incidents effect not only direct victims, but also their families and immediate vicinity struggling under psychological and socio-economic problems. Refugees who are survivors or other persons with disabilities face rising risks due to a lack of essential items, accessibility to necessary health and rehabilitative services as well as due to other forms of neglect and discrimination. Men and boys are the largest groups of landmines and unexploded ordnance casualties. For example in 2015, There were 546 females recorded as casualties in 2015 where 2,435 casualties the sex was not known.. (International Campaign to Ban Landmines – Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC), 2016a). (See: F-6). Considering that most refugees come from patriarchal

societies, male landmines and unexploded ordnance victims make their family more vulnerable. On the other hand female victims can be the most disadvantaged group and suffer different forms of discrimination as survivor. Child survivors also have more specific needs in all aspects of assistance, particularly psycho-social support and special education. Challenges from displacement multiple additional barriers to their full and equal participation..

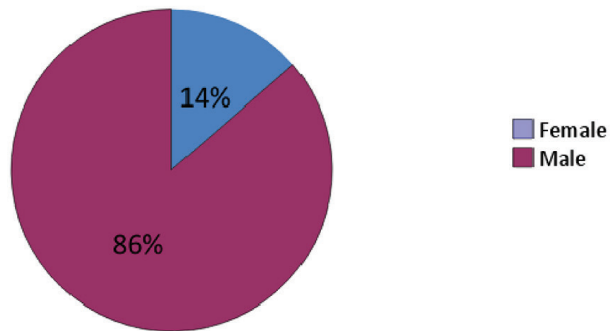


Figure 6: *Percentage of mine/UXO casualties by sex (2015). Note. Only the casualties for which the sex was known*

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this year, the UNHCR announced that 65.3 million people around the world became refugees, asylum-seekers, and IDPs around the world. Day by day, the need of ensuring safety of displaced persons from the risks of landmines and unexploded ordnance heightens.

While the lack of necessary protection during their journey on the EU migration routes remains undetected, the measures taken by the EU countries to prevent further movement to their preferred destination increase their vulnerability to become a victim of landmines and unexploded ordnance.

The lack of official recognition as refugees, conflict victims and landmine or cluster munition victims; citizenship status; and adequate documentation to regularize their status presents both immediate and longer term challenges to receiving needed assistance. It's clear that victims and other displaced persons with disabilities often face insufficient and unequal access to shelter, education, specialized healthcare and rehabilitation within refugee camps. States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty and Convention on Cluster Munitions, also known as Ottawa Treaty, are responsible for

ensuring adequate assistance for landmines and unexploded ordnance victims on their territory, no matter their citizenship status. As of June 2015, all the member states of the European Union became bound by Ottawa Treaty. EU and the country at the door of the EU should increase the accessibility of assistance to victims.

Due to their lack of knowledge of the arrival area and having limited contact with more informed locals, refugees and migrants need to access scarce local resources. In this context, in the Republic of Croatia some initiatives were established by local citizens. For example, Facebook page entitled “Dear refugees: Welcome to Croatia” that campaigns to provide useful information have been warning them of the dangers of landmines in English, Croatian, Arabic and Dari languages. States should take lessons from this example and should clearly express their commitment and mobilize national and international resources to overcome such barriers for refugees and asylum seekers.

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Other Resources

Child Rights International Network <http://www.crin.org/en/home/what-we-do/crinmail/crinmail-1185>

Croatian Mine Action Centre (CROMAC) MIS Portal <https://misportal.hcr.hr/HCRweb/faces/intro/introduction.jspx>

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