

## What war leaves behind

"Landmine. Danger." This is the sign at the entrance of Adam's property, over a dozen abandoned houses sit just 50 yards away and a bombed-out school never rebuilt, surrounded by unexploded ordnance. Two hectares of land next to the village of Kryshec, western Kosovo, cultivated up to 17 years ago in peppers, tomatoes, corn and wheat.

Then the clashes between the Yugoslav forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army, through the NATO intervention in 1999 to end the maddening inter-ethnic conflict that roiled Kosovo for 15 months. During a 78-day campaign, NATO dropped 1,392 bombs containing 295,700 sub-munitions on the country. An estimated 20 percent of those munitions didn't detonate, joining the untold numbers of mines and other explosives left behind by soldiers on both sides.

Thousands of these landmines and cluster bombs remained buried in the soil with dramatic consequences even today on the civilians life. The contaminated area consists of 1,000 hectares. "I was forced to stop farming. I saw what war left behind and all my crops destroyed by NATO bombing" told me Adam, looking at his field where eleven cluster munitions have been found and deactivated since August. "These 17 years of inactivity caused me a loss of about 40 thousand euros." The impossibility to take advantage of the land due to the unexploded ordnance pushed the family members to find new occupations. Adam began working as a teacher and his son found some odd jobs to make ends meet.

The United Nations swept the nation after the war and declared it free of ordnance in 2001 and the 18 de-mining agencies were ordered to leave the country. Data from the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor show more than 100 people have been injured by explosives since then, a sign pointing out that the reality was different than as described.

In 2008, when a serious accident occurred in the Pristina region, the UN revised its position and allowed some agencies to return operating there. In December 2016 I asked the de-miners about joining a team as it went hunting for bombs.

The slightest disturbance can cause an explosion, making the work so risky that the men and women who do it insisted that I had to wear body armor and helmet just to photograph them. That tedious full-time job falls to workers drawn from local communities. They receive one month of rigorous training before being deployed with bulletproof aprons and face shields. They work through early winter, when the weather makes the work too difficult. Each team is led by a seasoned veteran and includes a paramedic, although no one's been hurt since 2001, when a cluster bomb near Grebnik killed one person and injured another. The job requires pin-sharp concentration and tireless attention. The teams start by scanning an area with metal detectors, some of them fitted with ground-penetrating radar. Workers carefully clear brush and vegetation, and listen for the tell-tale beep that indicates a potential bomb. Anything suspicious is fenced off with red stakes. At that point, a worker starts digging a few feet away, slowly scraping away earth laterally to reveal the object from the side. The idea is to avoid easing any pressure bearing down on the possible bomb and detonating it. Any ordnance is immediately reported, and destroyed where it sits or removed for detonation elsewhere. At that point, the team makes another check of the area to ensure nothing is left behind.

They estimate that some 60 minefields remain— each littered with as many as a few hundred of bombs—and hope to clear them all by 2020 returning to Kosovo rural population, 60 percent of the whole country, a decontaminated landscape. For years, locals have collected timber in mined woods without being aware of the risk. The last death occurred few months ago.

Agriculture accounts for almost a third of the country economy — and the non-use of the fields turns itself into an economic and social impediment of vast proportions. The unemployment in some areas is still at 70 percent.

Kosovo remains one of the poorest areas in Europe, with as much as 45 percent of the population living below the official poverty line, and continue to depend on economic aids and foreign direct investments.