

Bosnia: Shepherds Fall Victim to Landmines

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Deadly legacy of Balkan wars and increasing border restrictions force region's shepherds to quit nomadic life.

Ismet Fusko's life has followed a pattern over the past half century. During the warm summer months, the Bosnian shepherd would watch over his flock before setting off on a long and arduous journey across the former Yugoslavia to find more clement winter pastureland.

Along the way, there would be dramas. He once had to wade across the freezing Sava river to avoid Croatian border patrols. On another occasion, one of his sheep set off an anti-tank mine, killing twenty of the flock and leaving him nursing shrapnel wounds in his legs.

This year, he decided that he could risk the journey no longer, blaming Bosnia's mine-infested land. The 65-year-old has joined a growing number of sheep farmers in Bosnia who have decided to call it a day.

At the end of each October, with the arrival of the first snows in Bosnia, Fusko would gather his sheep from summer grazing on the slopes of mount Vlasic and take them on a 250-mile trek east, towards the plains and milder weather of Vojvodina in northern Yugoslavia.

"This has always been a difficult way to make a living," said Jovan Vujinovic, a fellow nomadic shepherd from Vlasic mountain. "Since the war, though, it has been almost impossible for us to live this way."

Prior to the conflict, the sheer scale and natural geography of the former Yugoslavia had created a perfect environment for the nomadic lifestyle. Each winter, the shepherds were able to escape the harsh weather in the Bosnian and Montenegrin highlands by driving their sheep down through the valleys to the rolling plains of Serbia and Croatia.

There would be the inevitable run-ins with the forces of law and order and the occasional land disputes - but these problems could usually be resolved and the nomads would be generally left alone.

However, with the break-up of Yugoslavia, the nomads suddenly found themselves hemmed in - pinned between the land mines in their mountain homelands and the border guards of the newly formed states.

Over a lunch of wild strawberries and plum brandy, while his dogs watched over the sheep, Jovan reminisced about the old way of life and the difficulties he now faces. "Take a look around you - Bosnia has nothing but mountains and the sheep can't survive here during the winter," he said. "We have to keep moving in order to survive."

Like many of the farmers on Vlasic, Jovan began working at an early age. He was only 14 when he made his first journey into Croatia accompanying his father and a group of three other shepherds. When his father eventually retired, the flock was split equally between the members of the family. While his brothers sold their share to help set up a sawmill and fish farm, Jovan decided that he would continue the family tradition, despite the inherent difficulties of the job.

"Even before the war there were problems moving from one republic to another in Yugoslavia," he said.

“The police would try to catch us and we would have to pay a fine if we didn’t have the correct papers and veterinary certificates.”

The shepherds would spend nights up to their waists in freezing water illegally ferrying their sheep on small rafts across the Sava river into Croatia. On other occasions, they would have to hide their sheep deep in the forests to avoid the attention of the police.

But by the mid-Nineties, no amount of guile could help the nomads gain access into the newly formed states and their tougher border controls.

In recent years, they’ve only been able to travel as far as the banks of the Sava and Drina rivers, on the northern and eastern edges of Bosnia, where they have to fight for land, not only with other shepherds but also with local residents and the refugees who are now living there.

Bosnia’s current economic difficulties have put great strain on the land. With unemployment in some places as high as 65 per cent, people have had to resort to a subsistence level of existence and all viable land has been put to use.

Traditionally, the summer months have provided respite for Bosnia’s nomads, as they are able to take a break from their arduous travelling and return to their families in the mountains. Since the war, though, even the mountains no longer provide refuge.

Looking down over Vlasic, one can be forgiven for thinking that the conflict in Bosnia is now merely a distant unhappy memory – the landscape appears surprisingly unaffected by the devastation heaped upon it during the conflict. But the real threat in Bosnia lies three inches under the surface. Mine experts working in the region estimate that there are as many as 50,000 land mines in the Vlasic region alone.

Despite the obvious dangers, the shepherds seem almost oblivious as they move around the hillsides. Jovan produces a crumpled map from his back pocket, given to him by Dutch peacekeepers, that displays the minefields with ugly red dots. The map was obviously intended as no more than a rough guide, but Jovan waves it around as if it possesses special powers that will ward off evil.

Despite their apparent belief in their own invulnerability, however, almost all the shepherds have stories of mine incidents that have killed their animals or caused them injuries. International organisations have sought to raise awareness of the dangers, but they found it hard to communicate their message because the nomads are so difficult to get hold of.

Notwithstanding their great resilience, the changes of the past decade have begun to take their toll on the nomad population. Prior to the war, there were more than a hundred shepherds in the Vlasic region – just a fifth remain.

Some ponder the possibility of receiving compensation from the authorities for livestock killed by mines, but in the end the real question is that of the land that has disappeared from under the nomads’ feet, and, sadly, no amount of cash will be able to bring this back.

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Location: Balkans
Serbia

Croatia
Bosnia and
Herzegovina

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