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The Colombian HD Workshop: Developing a Plan of Action

Four decades of near-continuous conflict between non-state actors and government forces have left Colombia with an extensive, deadly legacy. Landmines, improvised explosive devices and other explosive ordnance litter the countryside, and casualty rates remain among the highest in the world. As conflict has subsided, Colombia has begun the challenging task of addressing and gathering information on problems caused by explosive remnants of war.

The Workshop

Sponsored by the Bureau of Political Military Affairs’ Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State and facilitated by the Mine Action Information Center at James Madison University, the Taller de Planificación del Desminado Humanitario en Colombia (Colombia Humanitarian Demining Planning Workshop) convened in Bogotá 9–12 June 2009. More than 40 representatives from the U.S. and Colombian governments, international organizations, national mine-action authorities, and key stakeholders in Colombia’s work against landmines and other ERW attended.

The workshop opened with speeches from Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos Calderón and the Director of PAICMA, Andrés Dávila. Both stressed the importance of fostering cooperation among military forces, national authorities and international partners, and of developing a plan of action that would integrate and expand demining capabilities. The speeches emphasized not only the urgency of the situation facing Colombia, but also the increasing opportunities for mine-action practitioners to work innovatively and collectively.

Officials from PAICMA and the Humanitarian Demining Department of the Colombian Armed Forces then presented on the country’s mine-clearance program and its planned expansion. Currently, Colombia has three demining teams operating around military bases and three operating in the Antioquia, Meta and Nariño departments. Each team consists of 45 personnel and during 2009, PAICMA plans to train an additional three teams. These new teams will begin operating in 2010 in the Bolívar, Tolima and Valle del Cauca departments.

Also during 2010, five teams will be trained and will begin operations in the Arauca, Caldas, Caquetá, Norte de Santander and Putumayo departments. By 2011, demining and information gathering will be undertaken by the full cohort of teams (including the three teams reallocated from demining military bases) in the 14 “high risk” departments.

Issue Development

After detailing the history of Colombian mine action and outlining plans for the future, workshop participants’ briefings turned to lessons learned and best practices for mine-action situations like Colombia’s. U.S. State Department consultant Murt McClay presented on mine-clearance prioritization, survey and land release—specifically how planning and execution can be affected by an insecure environment. (Complicating elements for clearance and survey in Colombia are ongoing conflict and recently defused tensions.) Steve Priestley, Director for International Projects at Mines Advisory Group, briefed on the lessons MAG has learned in its community liaison program.

The first day closed with a PM/WRA-hosted reception, and the proceedings reconvened on the second day with a briefing by Mohammad Breikat, Director of Jordan’s National Committee for Demining and Rehabilitation. NCDR is a success story for mine-action cooperation among civilian agencies, military personnel and nongovernmental organizations, having integrated resources and capabilities into a productive national effort. Finally, Joe Donahue, Chief Executive Officer of Information Management and Mine Action Programs (iMMAP), talked about techniques and practices for data collection and information management.

The presenters on best practices and lessons learned were available to provide advice, perspective and encouragement as participants began to develop plans for their areas of responsibility. (Complicating elements for clearing and survey were ongoing conflict and recently defused tensions.) Steve Priestley, Director for International Projects at Mines Advisory Group, briefed on mine-clearance prioritization, survey and land release—specifically how planning and execution can be affected by an insecure environment. (Complicating elements for clearance and survey in Colombia are ongoing conflict and recently defused tensions.) Steve Priestley, Director for International Projects at Mines Advisory Group, briefed on the lessons MAG has learned in its community liaison program.

Working Groups and Discussion

Two working groups were formed—one that focused on the information requirements for setting priorities and planning operations, and another that discussed the command-and-control requirements for demining operations and the security requirements for activities. Both groups addressed force development, training needs and resources required to conduct operations.

Working groups were not constrained to any rigid boundaries implied by the groups’ focus areas; instead, both groups were prompted to cast a wide net in proposing ideas. Facilitators had developed two lists of preliminary questions intended to spark discussion, and the working groups began by considering these. Both groups soon departed from the prepared discussion points as members of each considered the problems facing each area, the resources needed to address them, a way to begin doing so, and the primary agency or agencies that could take the lead. As each issue was debated, the working groups were encouraged to establish several goals and, if appropriate, set a preliminary timetable for accomplishing each goal. Both groups also considered what resources and training would be required to implement proposed actions.
Command and control: National, integrated mechanisms for command and control must be strengthened to allow PAICMA and the military command to adapt more quickly to the changing needs of the demining platoons, and to better accommodate expansions of the program.

Effective use of information. Primary information is not always available in the field, so a clear understanding of the sites that should be demined is not always available. Protocols for verifying information should be standardized.

Information requirements for planning operations and priority-setting. While the main prioritization tool for operations is the information in IMSMA, the secondary resource will certainly be communities returning to their lands. Criteria are needed for prioritization (safety, geography, land use), and adequate information will be needed to implement these criteria when planning operations commence.

Planning for additional survey teams. As more platoons are created, there must be a simultaneous increase in the number of survey teams. These new teams should employ a mixture of General and Technical Survey methodologies, with NGOs possibly providing supplementary support to military teams (activities should be coordinated through PAICMA).

Integrating community liaisons. Community liaisons were seen as a vital component for humanitarian de-mining. Although a structure for such a system is not yet ready, participants were interested in a hybridized civilian/military approach in the interim.

Coordinating victim assistance, clearance, mine-risk education and platoon activities. There are numerous information mechanisms for coordinating the listed activities, but none of them are comprehensive. Department committees, national information tables, the Intersectorial Commission for Action against AP Mines, and other venues provide important but limited opportunities for coordination. PAICMA will look to establish a regular venue for interaction and coordination.

The framework Plan of Action regarding the deployment of expanded mine-clearance capacities, Pablo Parra Gallego, Director of the Humanitarian Demin- ing section for PAICMA, discussed next steps, addressed the challenges involved in post-clearance community development, and spoke about the role of government agencies, international organizations and NGOs in mobilizing resources and developing plans for Colombia.

PAICMA Director Andrés Dávila spoke about his organization’s continuing work to improve mine-action integration in Colombia and to solicit international interest in Colombia’s progress. Dennis Barlow, Director of
Research in Colombia on Explosives Detection by Rats

Colombia has been the focus of attention in several articles in The Journal of ERW and Mine Action over the years mainly because Colombia continues to have landmine victims numbering among the highest in the world.\(^3\) According to the most recent Landmine Monitor Report,\(^3\) however, the number of fatalities began to decrease in 2007 for the first time since 2002.

Since 1999, the Landmine Monitor has provided background on the Colombian armed conflict, the state of the current landmine problem, casualty figures and explanations of victim-assistance programs. Few reports have mentioned the local scientific research and technological development of devices for detection and deactivation of explosives.

The 2000 Landmine Monitor Report briefly mentioned a potential research project aimed at developing a mine-detection robot. The project was to be carried out by the Department of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Los Andes in Bogotá.\(^3\) The 2001 Landmine Monitor Report, however, stated that this plan failed to take off when no groups showed interest in the initiative.\(^4\) Landmine Monitor entries from 2002–2008 make no mention of mine-detection research.

INVESTUD Introduces the Wistar Rat

Since 2004, the interdisciplinary research group INVESTUD of the Colombian National Police has been exploring if white Wistar rats of the Rattus norvegicus species (commonly used as lab rats) are capable of detecting explosives in an open field. An antecedent of this project is the APOPO program, which originated in Belgium and set up its first operations in Mozambique. APOPO relies on the olfactory abilities of the African giant pouched rat, Cricetomys gambianus, for landmine and unexploded-ordnance detection.\(^5\)

Although the Colombian research project led by INVESTUD has not yet tested its rats’ detecting abilities in a real minefield, the team of researchers continues to believe there are several advantages of Wistar rats detecting explosives over the current APOPO program. The two most relevant advantages are:

1. The white rat weighs less than the African giant pouched rat (450 grams versus 1,500 grams [1 pound vs. 3 pounds]), although the weight of the African giant pouched rat is generally not enough to trigger a typical anti-personnel mine;\(^6\) the white rat, being lighter, would be even less likely to set off a mine. This is particularly important because the mines terrorists use in Colombia are often more sensitive than a typical landmine.

2. The white rat is found and can reproduce anywhere in the world (because it is a classical strain of laboratory rat).\(^7\)

With financial support from the Colombian Ministry of National Defense and the Colombian National Police, INVESTUD has successfully

Moving Forward

With such a positive response to the Plan of Action and the energy surging the conference, there was a near-universal call for follow-on activities to commence as quickly as possible. The workshop helped build momentum for Colombia’s mine-action programs, attracting attention to achievements while helping jump start future work. Participants agreed to share more information, meet more frequently, and collaborate more closely on projects. The workshop’s Plan of Action will hopefully serve as a call for greater synergy and cooperation as Colombia’s demining capacity expands. \(^4\) See Endnotes, Page 78.