2007 Marks 10th Anniversary of Mine Action Standards

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Burmeses Separatist Group Signs Statement Against Landmines

The National Democratic Front of Burma signed a statement against landmine use at its January 2007 Central Executive Committee meeting. The statement directs various member organisations, which claimed landmines were an effective self-defense tactic, to find ways to minimize mine use.

The NDF also directed members to apply strict usage rules, regulate/oversee mine activity and ensure villagers in NDF areas are not harmed by the use of landmines. Formed in 1976, the NDF is an umbrella organization for armed opposition groups of Burma/Myanmar’s various ethnic nationalities. More than 2,000 people are estimated to be members of the National Democratic Front.
More than 40 countries have pledged to develop new international agreements to ban the use of cluster bombs by 2008. Belgium was also the first country to entirely ban cluster munitions, terminating its investments in such companies, as the new law prohibits Belgian banks from owning shares in cluster-bomb manufacturers or offering them credit. Parliament will publish a list of companies that manufacture cluster bombs. Several Belgian banks have already indicated they will not own such shares in the future. 

As part of the continuing efforts to ensure accessibility of the Standards to the mine-action community, UNMAS and the GICHD worked with the Web site manager at the Mine Action Information Center to redesign and streamline the site in 2007. In the new design, in addition to the IMAS in English, unofficial translations of some IMAS are now available in Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish for ease of reference. However, for the most up-to-date version, users must refer to the English version.

I am in Ecuador, a Latin American country of 13.3 million people, at the invitation of the Office of Humanitarian Demining of the Organization of American States. The OAS oversees demining processes throughout Latin America. Some of you may remember that two years ago I went to Nicaragua on a similar mission. This time I was asked to conduct trauma-training seminars in Quito and then do a field assessment. The purpose of my field visit was to evaluate the emergency medical capabilities and evacuation process in the unlikely event of a demining injury. I spent time visiting the workforces and medical facilities, interviewing deminers and medical personnel, and gaining a full understanding of the situation. Overall it was a very productive mission and I received substantial positive feedback.

A Little Background

Ecuador is one of the smallest countries in South America and sits astride the equator—hence its name. There are four distinct regions: the coast, the Andes highlands, the Oriente (the east) and the Galapagos Islands. Quito, the capital city of 1.4 million people, sits in the Andes at about 9,000 feet (2,743 meters) in a long valley surrounded by mountains and volcanoes. The recently restored Centro Histórico (historical center) is the old part of town designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site; it is quite impressive. The new part of town is quite modern, and plenty of American chain restaurants are visible on numerous street corners. With a pre-capita gross domestic product of US$3,700, Ecuador is better off than many of the countries I have visited recently, but still has a long way to go. Interestingly, in September 2000, Ecuador switched its currency and began using the U.S. dollar. Now I don’t mean that their currency is pegged to the dollar; they actually only use real U.S. dollars. U.S. coins, including the Sacajawea dollar that has all but disappeared from use in the States, are also in circulation. Ecuador’s history includes colonization by the Incas in the early 15th century and later by the Spanish in 1533. The country gained independence in 1822 and soon after, a long border dispute began with Peru. Wars and skirmishes were fought every few years until 1995. A compromise was finally reached and a peace treaty signed in 1998 when Ecuador gained a square kilometer (0.4 square mile) of land that was previously considered Peru’s. One of the unfortunate lasting results of the conflict, however, is an estimated 11,000 displaced landmines. 

Santiago’s Situation

Since the humanitarian mine-action programs began in Ecuador in 1999, there have been no demining injuries, however, one civilian death and two injuries have been reported in the region around Santiago. The sites we visited most recently began operations in 2004. Clearing is expected to continue until 2008 or 2009. Although clearing landmines is usually a slow, arduous and dangerous task, working in the jungle presents even more complex problems. Unlike minefields I have observed in Afghanistan, Kosovo and Bosnia, in Ecuador the mountainous terrain mixed with the thick jungle vegetation, humidity and high temperatures present even greater challenges.

The author describes his journey to Ecuador for a seminar he was invited to teach for medical personnel working in or around demining sites. Working with the Organization of American States, the author developed a seminar to teach mine-clearance experts what actions to take if someone is injured by a mine, enabling personnel to react to multiple types of stimuli while working in the field. The author explains the details of this seminar and why it is an important part of the mine-action process. He also provides information on Ecuador’s own mine problem.