August 2001

Stories From Ocotal

José Ramón Zepeda
Organization of American States (OAS)

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal

Part of the Defense and Security Studies Commons, Emergency and Disaster Management Commons, Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.
Stories from Ocotal

These stories are dedicated to all the people who have contributed, in one way or another, to the removal of mines worldwide and to the mine victims who must make the daily effort to reclaim their lives. Thank you Neyrin, Porfirio and Juan, and may God protect you. —José Ramon Zepeda B

By José Ramon Zepeda B, Administrative Secretary PADCA-DEA

Neyrin Rivera, 13 years old

Neyrin lives in Jalapa, near the Honduran border. This area is one of the most heavily mined regions in Nicaragua. Most of the inhabitants work the land and raise livestock. Neyrin’s parents, Mario Rivera and Maria Matilde Aguirre, work in the field and struggle for a better life every day.

On the morning of April 26, 1994, when he was barely 6 years old, Neyrin was helping relocate the family livestock when the cow he was walking on stepped on a mine. Neyrin was severely wounded and lay on the ground for almost two hours before his mother and uncle, hearing his cries from their home, were able to reach him. Neyrin’s right leg had to be amputated below the knee.

Today, Neyrin is in his second year at the middle school. He has overcome his disability so that he plays soccer and baseball. He has the opportunity to complete the second year of high school, at the age of 12, he went back to school to study commercial accounting. However, in the 1980’s, the economic and political situation in Nicaragua offered few opportunities to better one’s life. So Porfirio, along with two friends named Crescencio and Raúl, planned to emigrate to Honduras, not far from their native town of Jalapa, in order to search for work.

On June 15, 1984, three friends were travelling a place called Cerro La Jungla. Since while Raúl stepped on a mine, Raúl and Crescencio died instantly. Porfirio was badly injured, losing his right leg above the knee.

Since then Porfirio’s life has changed dramatically, as one might expect. Although the economic situation in Nicaragua makes it difficult for anyone to make a living, people with disabilities find it especially hard. Much of their difficulties are imposed by social attitudes as opposed to any physical limitation. “There are many jobs one can do with only one leg,” claims Porfirio, “yet no one will hire me because of my disability.”

Today Porfirio is an activist for the mine awareness campaign. He has given radio and television interviews at a local TV station in attempts to educate people about mines and disability awareness. Porfirio also seems to take advantage of every opportunity to further the cause of mine victims. Drawing on his accounting/business background, he has worked on proposals for three income-generating cooperatives for about 30 landmine survivors and their families (a chicken farm, a pig farm and a dairy farm) but has yet to secure the seed money for these small businesses.

In May 2001 Porfirio participated in the Launching the Voices Survivor Advocacy Leadership Training Program in Geneva, Switzerland. There, he and seven other survivors from the American region received international human rights training and participated in the Intercessional Meetings of the Mine Ban Treaty. Porfirio will again represent survivors from his region at the Third Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty that will take place in Managua in September.

PADCA-OAS has helped Porfirio obtain medical and rehabilitative services and provided logistical assistance for other activities to promote his social reintegration.

Juan Ramón López, 42 years old

Juan was born on October 5, 1958 in Mozote, a village in the province of Nicaragua. As a very young boy Juan worked on coffee farms, cutting and planting the coffee. Of humble circumstances, his family could only afford to send him to school until the third grade. The lack of economic opportunities in his community led Juan to leave home at the age of 16 in search of work.

In 1973, at the age of 14, Juan joined the ranks of the Sandinistas but left them after nine months. He was then captured by Somosa’s National Guard. However, he came out of that experience and the occupations against him unharmed. When the Sandinistas triumphed in 1979, they accused Juan of being a traitor to the revolution and he was forced to flee to Honduras. In search of protection in the northern mountains, he had no other choice but to join a contra-revolutionary guerrilla group called MILPAS. After Violeta Chamorro was elected president of Nicaragua in 1990, Juan entered the demobilization program that the Organization of American States (OAS) helped implement.

The 20-year-long war had devastated Nicaragua. Many fields had been mined and therefore rendered useless, which contributed to the already dire economic circumstances. Juan needed to work. During the war, Juan had learned to detect mines and take them out of the ground as a matter of survival. So, he was able to find work as a “peasant deminer”, employed by farm and plantation owners who needed their land cleared in order to return the fields to productivity.

Without the training, equipment, and support that professional deminers have, Juan still may have been a victim of the mine. However, thanks to the work of PADCA-OAS and the Mine Ban Treaty, he no longer has to fear going to work in the fields or into the jungle. PADCA-OAS has helped Juan receive new prostheses which he uses to help the mine victims in his community.

Through the support of the OAS assistance program (PADCA-OEA), Juan received new prostheses and rehabilitative care. He takes great pride in the fact that although he has lost both legs, the thousands of mines he has removed will never kill or maim anyone else. Juan’s luck with mines and his perseverance in the face of it has made him the subject of a joke throughout the surrounding communities. People say that the next time Juan López steps on a mine he will lose his head, but it will be OK because he will just get a prosthetic one and continue to be as powerful a force for good as he was before. Although somewhat cynical, the joke also testifies to the fact that there is a man of great energy with the will to provide a better life for his family and his people.

Today Juan is the president of the Council for Indigenous Peoples in the Department of El Paraíso.

---

Although technically practiced, “peasant demining” is highly dangerous and illegal in Nicaragua. Peasant deminers don’t have the proper training nor the equipment to demine within a reasonable margin of safety. In Nicaragua, legal deminers are military personnel, receive expert training, use adequate demining technology, wear protective clothing, have support staff, and are not exposed to danger to the same extent as the peasant deminers. However, peasant deminers often work alone in a field with no equipment. They just step carefully and use a knife to pry away the dirt from suspicious-looking objects. If there is an accident, it may not even be noticed for hours or days. Landmine victims typically pay for their own medical care, which is often not good enough and can be very expensive.

Without the processing of the land in the municipalities of Díptilo, Mozonte, and San Fernando. But the 3,054th mine found Juan’s lower left leg. On December 17, 1997, Juan stepped on a mine while digging. Juan received a prosthetic and recovered well enough to work his own land. On July 11, 1998, Juan was again involved in the processing of his own land when he lost his balance and fell into a ditch. That fall set off a mine explosion which blew off his lower right leg and the recently fitted prosthesis on his left leg, as well as causing serious injuries over almost his entire body.

With the help of the OAS assistance program (PADCA-OEA), Juan received new prostheses and rehabilitative care. He takes great pride in the fact that although he has lost both legs, the thousands of mines he has removed will never kill or maim anyone else. Juan’s luck with mines and his perseverance in the face of it has made him the subject of a joke throughout the surrounding communities. People say that the next time Juan López steps on a mine he will lose his head, but it will be OK because he will just get a prosthetic one and continue to be as powerful a force for good as he was before. Although somewhat cynical, the joke also testifies to the fact that there is a man of great energy with the will to provide a better life for his family and his people.
mine operators, there were also several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in demining in Nicaragua during Stage 4: the Programa de Barreminas Ligares with Japan, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Nicaraguan Center for Strategic Studies and the Italian NGO MOVIMONDO.

During this time, the UEDs grew to 400 men that demined 192 targets, destroyed 33,783 mines and cleared 1,142,422 square meters. MARMINGCA also began certifying Nicaraguan military personnel to oversee demining operations.

Methods Used in Demining

Nicaragua has used a variety of methods in its demining efforts, beginning with basic equipment such as probes and metal detectors and moving towards mine-detecting dogs and large mechanical mine clearance equipment, to ensure the most effective demining possible. The Nicaraguan Government is currently working out a deal with Japan to get more mechanical clearance machinery and hopes to put that into effect as soon as possible.

More difficulties to find and remove. Floating and high winds also damaged some of the equipment used in the demining operations, causing further delays. The population at risk from landmines has increased significantly because the mines have been scattered to previously mine-free areas.

Other Aspects of the National Demining Program

Mine awareness and victim assistance are integral parts of the National Demining Plan. There has been an ongoing educational campaign focusing on the prevention of mine-related accidents. Fundamental elements of this campaign include the labeling of mine fields, a mass media campaign using television and radio, educational materials and mine awareness training. The National Demining Commission has formed a subcommission, the Subcommission on Education on the Prevention of Mine-Related Accidents, to deal with this aspect of demining directly.

Several NGOs are also involved in mine awareness and victim assistance programs in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Center of Strategic Studies and the Nicaraguan Red Cross both run programs in which they train local people to promote mine awareness and victim assistance. PADCA helps to fund the mine awareness programs presented by the Army, and UNICEF is becoming more involved in both mine awareness and victim assistance efforts in Nicaragua.

Results Thus Far

Although there is still much to be done, Nicaragua has had relative success in its demining efforts thus far. UEDs have destroyed 64,874 mines and demined 640 of 991 targets, clearing 32 of the 62 municipalities and almost half of the borderland. They have been able to rehabilitate 2,120,136 square meters of land, benefiting 668,069 people.

Goals for 2001

In the coming year, Nicaragua's demining goals are to:
- Destroy 11,684 planted mines.
- Destroy 45,000 stockpiled anti-personnel mines (aiming to finish destruction of stockpiles in December 2002).
- Employ mine-clearing machinery donated by Japan.
- Declare Chinandega, Boaco, Chontales and other municipalities landmine-free.

Contact Information

Major Senjio Ugarte
Chief of Staff
Nicaraguan Engineer Corps
Managua, Nicaragua
Tel: 505-222-7770
Fax: 505-222-4845
E-mail: ugarites@ideay.com.ni

Stories from Ocotal

Contact Information

Rachel Willerman
Landmine Survivors Network
1240 K Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005
Tel: 202-464-0007
E-mail: Raquel@landminesurvivors.org

*All photos courtesy of the Landmine Survivors Network.

https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol5/iss2/26