December 2002

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A Firsthand Experience with Mine Action:  On the Ground with the Organization of American States in Nicaragua

Founder and chairperson of Global Care Unlimited, Inc., Mark Hyman, has been actively working with the global landmine issue for the past three years. This past June, he visited Nicaragua to witness the effects of landmines firsthand and to find out how his middle school students could help. This piece describes what he found there.

by Mark Hyman, Global Care Unlimited, Inc.

Introduction

For the last three years, as coordinator of the Tenafly Middle School Landmine Awareness Club of Tenafly, New Jersey, and founder/chairperson of the student-inspired humanitarian service organization, Global Care Unlimited, Inc., I have assumed the responsibility for introducing middle school students to the facts, topics and humanitarian issues regarding the global landmine crisis. Since the beginning of this process, I have recognized both a strong desire and educational need to augment my understanding of the humanitarian dimensions of mine action, and in turn that of my students, through a field trip to a mine-affected country.

This June I reached this goal through a trip to Nicaragua under the guidance and supervision of the Organization of American States (OAS). The visit, organized by William A. McDonough, coordinator of the OAS Mine Action Program, provided an extraordinary opportunity for me to gain a firsthand understanding of demining and victim assistance programs supported by the OAS. Additionally, this trip afforded me an opportunity to develop a sense of the immediacy of the issue. Thus, the purpose of this article is to share my discoveries regarding the humanitarian mine action programs offered by the OAS, as well as, to provide my impressions, where relevant, of life in Nicaragua.

Background

The Catalyst for the Formation of a School-Based Mine Action Initiative

My decision to visit Nicaragua was a natural outgrowth of a three-year mine action initiative organized and developed by the students of the Tenafly Middle School Landmine Awareness Club and myself. Our initial interest in the global landmine issue emerged from a keynote address delivered by American landmine survivor and activist, Ken Rutherford, at a human rights day event held at Tenafly Middle School on February 24, 1999. In addition to Mr. Rutherford's powerful and moving testimony regarding his life-changing encounter with a landmine, representatives from the UNA-USA delivered presentations to our entire student body regarding their Adopt-A-Minefield program. A display of a landmine exhibit in our school lobby, on loan from UNICEF, provided a powerful visual component to the overall landmine education offered on Human Rights Day.

This powerful exposure to the global landmine issue and its tragic impact on innocent lives provided the impetus for forming our middle school landmine awareness club and adopting a mine-affected village.

Global Care Unlimited's Successful Adoption of a Mine-Affected Village

After guiding the students through research about the global landmine crisis, the students and I selected the mine-affected village of Poxvirdz in Bonnia-Herzegovina as their adopted village. Following the formation of Global Care Unlimited, Inc. in February 2000, we began a year-long mine action initiative aimed at educating Tenafly and surrounding communities about global landmine issues and raising sufficient funds to demine an emergency area of Poxvirdz near the Al Hasidic Elementary School. After a year of tireless work on the part of the students, Global Care Unlimited, Inc., supported by a matching grant from the State Department Office of Humanitarian Demining (PM/HD), achieved their goal of raising $30,000 for demining Poxvirdz. This achievement was celebrated at Tenafly Middle School on February 8, 2001, through a signing ceremony between Jernej Cimpresek, Director of the Slovenian International Trust Fund for Demining Patients, Director of the PM/HD, and myself, on behalf of the students and supportive adults of Global Care Unlimited, Inc.

A Connection Between Global Care Unlimited and a Landmine Mass Film in Nicaragua

Prior to Global Care Unlimited's planning for its 2001-2002 mine action initiative, I was contacted by filmmaker Bob Altman, who was desarrollando about landmines based in Nicaragua for the Hallmark Entertainment Channel. Mr. Altman's goal was to create a dramatic story that would represent the plight of mine-affected citizens worldwide. He hoped such a visualization of the impact of landmines would inspire a sense of American youth in learning more about landmines, as well as to promote the capacity of youth to make a constructive difference in mine action.

Although our demining fund had not yet been given to assist a Bosnian village, Mr. Altman felt strongly that Global Care Unlimited, Inc., represented an exemplary program for youth participation and leadership in mine action. Consequently, he decided to cite Global Care Unlimited, Inc., as the student organization responsible for assisting in the demining of the mine-affected Nicaragua village featured in his movie, "The Garden."

Turning Our Attention to Nicaragua, the Organization of American States and Programs to Assist Landmine Survivors

The anticipated attention and credit afforded Global Care Unlimited, Inc., by Mr. Altman's upcoming landmine film propelled me to research the actual landmine problem in Nicaragua to find out how we might actually assist Nicaragua. During this process, I contacted William A. McDonough of the OAS Mine Action Program. Our conversation revealed a perfect match of interest and alignment. Therefore, the cost for supporting demining operations in Nicaragua was prohibitive, Mr. McDonough informed me that the OAS had just contracted with INATEC, a local vocational skills training center in Boaca, to provide job training to Nicaraguan landmine survivors. For approximately $1,500 per client, INATEC would provide courses in a wide variety of vocational skills aimed at assisting the reintegration of landmine survivors into their local workplace. After this correspondence Global Care Unlimited, Inc., committed to sponsoring landmine survivors attending the INATEC program.

Global Care Unlimited and the Landmine Mass Film in Nicaragua

On March 7, 2002, Global Care Unlimited, Inc. hosted a mine action conference attended at educating middle and high school youth about the global landmine problem and encouraging their participation in our burgeoning youth mine action initiatives. The conference featured a keynote address by Mr. Rutherford, a prominent array of landmine action presenters, including landmine survivors, demining professionals and mine action advocates from the OAS, the United Nations, the State Department, Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation and Landmine Survivors Network.

In addition to donating $10,000 (including a matching State Department grant) toward the demining of another Baltic minefield in Gornja Soponica, Global Care Unlimited, Inc. officially became the first mine action organization to support the OAS-sponsored job training program at INATEC by providing $1,300 to sponsor Meylin, a Nicaraguan landmine survivor who had lost both of her legs at the age of nine.

Following the March conference, Mr. McDonough offered me my request and arranged an itinerary aimed at providing a full picture of the OAS Nicaraguan mine action program. The itinerary included visits to CENAPRORO and INATEC to show OAS-sponsored rehabilitation programs for landmine survivors, as well as a trip to a minefield and attendance at a national stockpile destruction of 10,000 landmines.

General Impressions of Nicaragua

The Persistence of Poverty

Launched on June 15, 2002, for a ten-day stay in Nicaragua, While I had watched numerous videos and read extensively about the landmine issue, I had never traveled outside the United States and Canada, much less to a third world country such as Nicaragua. I knew that Nicaragua was considered possibly the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Yet, while I was driven from the airport to my hotel in the capital city of Managua, I found myself riveted to the images presenting themselves before me. In particular, I was stunned by the extent and nature of the poverty evident along the streets of Managua. The majority of homes appeared to consist only of pieces of discarded aluminum or other scrap metal nailed together to provide the most basic shelter. Uncollected garbage and stray debris was commonplace, as...
NOTES FROM THE FIELD

CENAPROTO offers the necessary first steps in the process of rehabilitating landmine survivors. The Critical Next Step in Rehabilitation: Developing Vocational Skills in Landmine Survivors

The Critical Next Step in Rehabilitation: Developing Vocational Skills in Landmine Survivors

Chasing the Daylight of Their Rehabilitation Journey: acquiring a skill that might help them gain employment. Each man interviewed this latter wish of obtaining work with deep conviction. Independent employment for these survivors was tantamount to fully reclaiming their wasted lives.

In addition to these men, I had the privilege of meeting Meylin in INATEC's computer lab. At the time of my visit, Meylin was the sole female client at INATEC, an indication of the prevalence of landmine accidents among males in Nicaragua. She had lost her legs at the age of nine, and now 12 years later, she was striving to obtain sufficient competency with word processing. After I explained my connection, as chairperson of Global Care Unlimited, Inc., to her sponsorship at INATEC, she smiled and spoke about her accident and her professional aspirations. However, I detected a sadness in her that was present even beneath her smile. Sullenly, I wished that her inner strength, as with all these clients, would ultimately win this battle for her and land her a job, and the heightened sense of dignity and self-worth that it would provide.

Visiting a Minefield in Montagnas

"Peligro Campo Minado"

The same day of my visit to INATEC, I was escorted to Front Three of the Nicaraguan demining operations in Montagnas to gain my first experience at the site of an actual minefield. This experience left an indelible mark on me.

As I was escorted in the OAS van on the dirt road leading to the minefield, I passed two young girls walking in the same direction. They carried backpacks and wore the white shirts and blue skirts commonly worn by Nicaraguan schoolgirls. They appeared to be about nine or ten years old, the same age as Meylin when she suffered her mine accident twelve years ago. They walked alongside of the van had traveled more than the length of a football field when yellow caution tape attached to tree stumps appeared along the left side of the road to mark the perimeter of a minefield. The tape contained a repeating message throughout its length, "Peligro Campo Minado" or "OAS Mine Field." Between each repetition of this eerie refrain resided a black image of a skull and bones. At intervals just inside the minefield's perimeter,我和 mine were strategically placed, an ominous and forbidding feeling.

I thought of the schoolchildren who would soon be passing this minefield and its accompanying signs and warnings, and I wondered how these images might affect their view of the world's: their understanding of the world, as the adult world resolves its differences.

An Orientation: 17,000 People Affected

Upon arriving at the army demining tent, I heard a presentation, complete with a national map and details regarding the accomplishments of the demining team at Front Three, the status of the demining in progress, and the goals, strategies and timetable for completion of their mission. (It should be noted that, in Nicaragua, demining is conducted by army personnel, under the supervision of non-governmental organizations (from Central and South America) Implements for the detection, tagging and removal of landmines were visible on a table inside the meeting tent.

During his presentation, the demining supervisor stated that 17,000 people lived in the area surrounding the minefield. I thought again of the unescorted children walking up the path, and recognized vividly the importance of the providing alternative pathways and for the schoolchildren and especially children, living in mine-affected communities.

Demonstration of the Manual and Dog Detection Technique

The next phase of our experience involved watching the demonstration of the procedure used to detect and tag a landmine, as well as to prepare the ground for its removal. The process included the
use of a mine-sniffing dog for mine detection, followed by the placement of a yellow flag to mark the presence of a possible landmine. Then the human or manual deminer used a probing device to determine the precise location of the dog’s discovery. Since in this case a mock mine was found (as opposed to a piece of scrap metal, for example), the deminer proceeded to meticulously strip and cut the surrounding grass and vegetation to prepare the ground for the landmine’s later removal.

The process lasted about twenty minutes. Despite the knowledge that this process was being conducted under simulated conditions, within a mock minefield and containing fake landmines, it was not hard to imagine the presence of a real landmine and the accompanying danger associated with its detection and removal. The mood of extreme seriousness and concentration transmitted by the deminer and the observant personnel reinforced the gravity of this procedure.

A Panoramic View of the Minefield: Its Proximity to Village Life

After this demonstration, we followed the deminers up a hill to gain a panoramic perspective of the minefield. Several aspects of this perspective jolted me. First, this view revealed the enormity of the actual minefield, approximately 600 meters long or about six American football fields, according to Carlos Osorno, the national coordinator for the OAS mine-action program. Mr. Osorno also drew my attention to the numerous yellow flags visible within the minefield. These flags, the same type used to designate the detection of a mock mine in the previous demonstration, represented locations at which actual landmines had been detected. Perhaps 50 or more flags flew within the minefield as a testament to the deadly seriousness of this demining mission.

The second striking aspect to this view was the proximity of shelters and the local village of Marianas to the minefield. To these residents, the minefield provided a graphic daily reminder of the consequences of war upon civilians, even after the cessation of hostilities.

But the last visual impression from this view was the most powerful: that of three children walking along the road past the yellow caution tape demarcating the presence of the minefield. Apparently, these children were returning home from school, walking along the only path connecting their home to the school in Marianas. I was reminded of a photograph I had received from our adopted village in Podvidr in which schoolchildren were walking in single file behind an adult. I wondered, “How many thousands of children must walk past skulls and bones and menacing reminders of a war’s deadly residue on a daily basis? How might such daily encounters with danger affect these children? How much of childhood innocence and wonder might these images destroy, to be replaced by feelings of insecurity and suspicion?”

While overlooking the Marianas minefield, I asked the demining supervisor about any mine-related accidents that had occurred to the local population. He stated that eight people had been victims of landmines, five of whom had died. Apparently, none of these were children. He also claimed that 50 cattle had been killed while grazing.

As we drove back down the hill toward the minefield, I suddenly noticed a scene and asked my driver to stop the van just off the road, a short distance from the minefield. Several dozen cattle lay in the shade of the trees, grazing or lounging silently.

Witness to a Massive Destruction of Landmines

The following day, I was invited by the OAS to witness the destruction of 10,000 landmines from the Nicaraguan national stockpile in accordance with their commitment, as a signatory to the Ottawa Convention or Mine Ban Treaty. The event was attended by numerous dignitaries and representatives from organizations involved with mine action in Nicaragua and presided over by Minister of Defense, Dr. Jose Adams Guerra.

The location in which the detonation was set to occur lay about two miles away from our observation area. Yet all attendees were given earplugs to buffer us from the auditory impact of the explosions. Five detonation lines extended from five buttons at our observation area to the detonation site. Finally, people were given the honor of pressing a detonation button. And five massive shrieking explosions provided a dramatic visual and sonic evidence of the simultaneous destruction of thousands of landmines, and of the commitment of Nicaragua to eliminate the threat of landmines from their border.

Closing Thoughts

The presence of landmines and their impact on mine-affected civilians and communities graphically reveals the destructive consequences of the inability of particular peoples and nations to resolve conflict at a given time in their history. Tragically, with respect to landmines, the cessation of hostilities does not concurrently ensure the cessation of victims of war. All peoples and nations carry an undeniable moral responsibility to work towards reducing, and ultimately eliminating altogether, the causes which produce military conflict, and which in turn lead to the laying of landmines. As humanity strives to achieve this ideal, we must accept the humanitarian responsibility for doing all we can to heal the wounds of innocent civilians produced by war and conflict. And, I believe, we must do all we can to educate humanity about the presence and consequences of landmines and support those organizations, like the OAS, seeking to remove mines and restore dignity and self-worth to landmine survivors.

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Ending the Tragedy of Landmines Through Innovation and Cooperation

Rotary International, the U.S. State Department and James Madison University’s Mine Action Information Center (MAC) gathered with many of the world’s leading mine action authorities to quantify the global landmine crisis. It was everyone’s hope that the conference would yield a greater level of synergy, as well as harness the considerable resources of the Rotarians. Given the overwhelming response and participation, it appears that those wishes will be granted.

by David Hartley, MAIC

Introduction

Seattle’s recent landmine conference was a meeting of the minds, a free exchange of ideas and, most importantly, a cry for help. On September 30th and October 1st, 2002, Rotary International, a worldwide network of volunteers and leaders dedicated to ethical and moral advancement, witnessed an enthusiastic ouverture by a wide variety of members of the mine action community. With special taped appearances by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Queen Noor Al Hussein of Jordan—as well as a speech by Special Representative of the President and Secretary of State for Mine Action Lincoln P. Bloomfield—the conference featured many high-profile mine action figures. According to Mr. Bloomfield, the two-day event was an opportunity to “create new cooperative initiatives to help make the world mine safe” by “bringing Rotarians from around the world together with mine action experts and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are already partnered with [the U.S. State Department],” Powell agreed, “this Seattle meeting can help to forge powerful public-private partnerships that save lives and bring new hope to men, women and children who live in mine-affected countries all across the globe.”

is finite and realistic. The task, however, will require dedication and persistence. Many of the attendees were also quick to point out that the world will probably never be mine-free, making the world mine safe, however, is a realistic and desirable goal.

Ken Rutherford, the dual-ampu-
tee co-founder of the Landmine Survivors Network, was on hand for the dura-
tion of the conference. His presence and words affirmed the tangible threat of mines and UXO for Americans it is easy to perceive the landmine menace as remote. For the millions of individuals liv-
ing in mine-infested regions, however, the threat is horrifyingly real. Emanuel Akomu, who lost both of his hands in a landmine accident more than 20 years ago, provided living evidence of both human resilience and shocking tragedy. His first pair of prostheses lasted 17 years (a typical prosthesis should last no more

Proceedings

Opening the conference, Secretary of State Colin Powell achieved a delicate balance by stressing both mine action’s many successes and the need for more funding and support. Despite “conceived international action over the past decade” to reduce “landmine casualties worldwide from 26,000 per year to approximately 10,000 annually,” Powell emphasized “that millions of dead landmines still remain buried, waiting to kill.” The challenge of ridding the world of landmines

Published by JMU Scholarly Commons, 2002

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