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Humanitarian Demining Within the American Continent: A Silent and Successful Reality

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Within the American Continent: A Silent and Successful Reality

Introduction

The objective of the Millennium Development plan of the United Nations is to "radically reduce poverty and hunger (and) guarantee the sustainability of the environment." Through the selfless efforts of the humanitarian demining programs in Central and South America by the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), the preceding objectives are being accomplished. Thus, I am overwhelmingly compelled to share the successes and sing the praises of the personal sacrifices taken on by demining personnel.

In this article, I seek to manifest the experiences of the Armed Forces' humanitarian demining teams stationed in mine-affected countries. Information expressing the important roles of different military components, i.e., host or visiting military, will be given throughout this article.

Background

The mandate for humanitarian demining programs by the OAS were honored in the 33rd ordinary session of the General Assembly, where the following resolutions were approved: GA/RES 1889 (XXII-10/22) "The Western Hemisphere as an anti-personnel landmine-free zone?" GA/RES 1890 (XXII-10/22) "Support for the program of Integral Action against anti-personnel mines in Central America" and GA/RES 1875 "Support for action against anti-personnel mines in Peru and Ecuador."

In 1998, the OAS's Unit for the Promotion of Democracy (UPD) created the Comprehensive Action Against Anti-personnel Mines (AICMA) to confront the complex, difficult and persistent aspects related to crises caused by anti-personnel (AP) mines. In 1991, the Assistance Program for Demining in Central America (PADCA) was incorporated within the framework of the AICMA per the request of numerous AP mine-affected countries in Central America. A distinctive facet of the AICMA program is its continuously humanitarian character. In conjunction with IADB, AICMA seeks to restore living conditions, increase the confidence of the inhabitants, reduce UXO/AP mine threats and dangers, and restore cleared land in mine-affected areas for use in agriculture and cattle-raising activities.

This program also covers the following fields of action: assistance in surveying, mapping, locating and clearing of minefields; mine risk education (MRE) for the civilian population; support for mine victims, including physical and psychological rehabilitation; socio-economic reintegration of mined areas and supervision and support for the destruction of stockpiled mines. The principal responsibilities of the UPD within AICMA are to collect funds from the international community, administer and manage resources, and coordinate the program from a diplomatic and political perspective. The IADB is the entity responsible for organizing a team of international supervisors for countries supported by the AICMA program. They are also responsible for providing technical assistance, training demining troops, and guaranteeing that the operations are appropriate and comply with international security standards.

The achievements of the AICMA are due, in great measure, to the invaluable and generous support of various Member States (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, Venezuela and the United States). These Member States have provided technical advice and supervises through IADB. As well, the achievements of AICMA would not have been accomplished without the numerous contributions of key international donors such as Germany, Australia, Brazil, Canada, South Korea, Denmark, Spain, the United States, Russia, the European Union, France, Italy, Japan, Norway, the United Kingdom and Sweden, among others.

Furthermore, without the national commitment and contributions from the beneficiary countries of the AICMA program, where the Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in Central America (MARMINAS) and the Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in South America (MARMINAS) are operating, the key aspect of the program's structure would have been missing. In Central America, the mission of MARMINAS continues supporting the rational efforts of Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, while the program in Costa Rica has concluded.

Likewise, within the mission of MARMINAS, the demining activities in Ecuador and Peru have gained momentum.

Visions From an External Perspective

The activities related to the support and rehabilitation of people affected by mines make up the wide range of tasks and efforts from which valuable experiences can be drawn. Some of the diverse tasks carried out in humanitarian demining require the participation and coordination of high-level OAS individuals. It is imperative that these OAS officials provide incentives for donors to contribute and for these contributing countries to provide Armed Forces officers to compose teams of supervisors and monitors. There also needs to be a commitment and coordination among the countries providing military forces and within the different levels of government of the beneficiary country. This enables large geographic extensions of land where landmines are impeding the development of the region to be cleared.

Through the coordinated efforts of civilians and military personnel, these objectives are being achieved. A testament to this is Costa Rica, which became the first country free of AP landmines through the successes of its humanitarian demining program. Its program included joint efforts by civilians and military organizations united by the call to humanitarian service. Being conscious that this is not a particular task of the Armed Forces, the perspective that is sought within this article is to highlight the peacebuilding and self-sacrificing task of military personnel.

Drive and Dedication

During one of the first field visits to Honduras, an opportunity was presented to verify the work and "drive" being carried out by military personnel in Chaletuna. It became evident that the responsibility of clearing mines in areas where the temperature is normally higher than 35 degrees Celsius is not an easy job. In addition to the temperature, Hurricane Mitch added more difficulty to the job as mines were scattered in various places.
and depths, affecting their election and decision-making. However, they claimed, adverse conditions did not discourage the specialists nor decrease their drive.

The outcomes of this work are the direct results of the functions carried out by the international supervisors and monitors. These teams of professionals, from army or military, and non-commissioned officers, are representatives of diverse countries throughout the Americas. Their principal mission is to supervise demining tasks, ensure that operations follow international demining norms and provide for the safety of the soldiers that execute the tasks. In addition, they participate in the planning of the tasks related to impact surveys and certifying that the work is being carried out in compliance with strict security norms. In order to carry out these tasks, they must attend an intense training program in order to be qualified. With time, camaraderie and the purpose begin to develop with the demining teams; these aspects contribute significantly to strengthening the ties between civilians and the military. Thus, the confidence and affection of the civilian population toward their soldiers are reinforced.

On a daily basis, the team coordinates with national military authorities that are responsible for clearing their territories. They have the responsibility of suspending work if it is not being executed in accordance with established norms. However, they must also observe the realities of the terrain and particular situations and ensure that they do not become an impediment to the work, all while staying within the perspective of security.

One of the most important aspects of this type of work, where the daily relationship of soldiers from diverse countries is motivated by the sense of serving a country and the international community, is the significant increase in confidence and security the community gains. A situation that demonstrates this took place last year between Peru and Ecuador. These two governments committed to clearing areas in Peru and formed a sense of camaraderie as they worked toward a humanitarian objective. These effects were significant in helping to overcome historical differences between nations and in calming the mine-related fears of Peruvians.

Although confronted with hard work and transferred to border areas where memories of conflict can easily return, the team worked toward the objectives of camaraderie and a humanitarian end. This is seen in the displayed energy of soldiers as they demonstrate motivation for what they are doing. They can personally verify how recovered terrain is now being utilized for agricultural production in socio-afflicted regions. Additionally, they directly receive the expressions of fondness from the people when they see their lands cleaned and returned.

The unit commanders directed by the host country to direct these missions discover how their capacity to manage can extend borders. The result of their efforts not only is projected directly to the communities of their own countries, but also remains imprinted in the international community. This is because they have taken part in an effort where various countries participate in humanitarian objectives and goals.

The demining experiences carried out by Armed Forces personnel have achieved great results in respect to fulfilling a job with a high incidence of security. Those tasks have cleared terrain contaminated by mines and have offered tranquility and security to the citizens that live in their sectors. Thus, the efforts of international organizations aimed toward peace and security in the hemisphere can be visualized with positive and concrete results.

Achievements

SOUTH AMERICA

During 2003, important efforts toward the elimination of AP mines sown in Central America were accomplished. The number of mines and UXO that have been destroyed as of August 31, 2003, reached a total of 28,793. The area cleared reached 1,280,453 sq m among the Crossing of Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

In April 2002, MARMINCRA began to support the humanitarian demining activities both in Peru and Ecuador. MARMINCRA sent international supervision on assignees, supplied technical assistance to the armies, and directed basic courses to the sappers and Demining Operation Planning.

CENTRAL AMERICA

In 1998, Ecuador and Peru initiated the task of eliminating mines from their respective territories. Both countries developed different methods for demining their territories, realizing that their situations were different. Ecuador ratified the Ottawa Convention on April 20, 1999. Later, on September 22, 1999, the Demining Center of Ecuador (CENDEM) was created through Executive Decree Number 1297. In March 2001, the agreement between Ecuador and the OAS was signed and put into practice with the AICMA program. Peru, in turn, developed the first phase of demining operations in 1999 with bilateral assistance from the United States and Canada. In May 2001, the OAS and the Peruvian government signed the agreement for the coordination of international support through the AICMA. On May 1, 2003, MARMINCRA was created with headquarters in Zacuma, Peru.

Conclusion

As an observer, I have seen the importance of humanitarian demining in Central and South America. The important and un告诉 work carried out by the Armed Forces within the different roles that they execute is inspiring. Through this article, one can only visualize the great successes of the OAS and IADB’s coordinated efforts between civilian and military organizations. Although not well known, they have achieved a great degree of success in liberating countries from the threat of AP mines, allowing for economic and developmental activities to boom in countries. It only remains to congratulate the efforts of all of the members of the demining batteries for their unselfish work, which made possible the activities of the military today and project their role for the future.

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According to the Ottawa Protocol, the States Parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) met in Geneva and agreed to the issuance of a fifth protocol on explosive remnants of war (ERW). This new international humanitarian law is designed to minimize the risks and effects of ERW in the post-conflict period. While the Ottawa Convention has focused attention on the issue of AP landmines, the mine action community has long known that in the post-conflict environment, there are many different explosive hazards that can be found. In 2000, it was the highest number of injuries caused by cluster munitions in Kosovo that led the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to call for new international law to address ERW. Three years later, the new "Protocol on Explosive Remnants of War" was concluded.

Implications for Mine Action

The new protocol is a recognition by the states of the serious post-conflict humanitarian problems caused by ERW. The protocol contains 11 articles and a separate (non-binding) technical annex. These articles specify post-conflict remedial measures of a generic nature to minimize the humanitarian risks and effects of ERW. The main articles in this protocol are Article Two, which provides definitions of explosive remnants (EROS, UXO, abandoned EOD and ERW, thereby becoming a legal term in international law; Article Three, which covers clearance, removal or destruction of ERW; and Article Four, on the recording, retaining and transmission of information.

The future successful impact of the protocol will depend on how the states implement its contents. There is scope for different interpretations of what is required from signatories. However, if we take a positive view and assume the states enact all measures of the protocol and the technical annex, the main differences for the members of mine action community will be to make their job easier and more efficient in the post-conflict period.

First, the disciplines of mine clearance and mine risk education (MRE) should benefit. The protocol enables States Parties responsible, to varying degrees, for the provision of resources (technical, financial, material and personnel) to undertake work in these areas. What is not clear, however, is how many and through which channels resources will be allocated. The protocol allows for the states to undertake work in such areas as clearance, survey and MRE, either directly or via a third party (which could be the United Nations or other governmental bodies) or other parties involved in post-conflict clearance, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

There may be a concern that military forces, with little understanding of the process of humanitarian mine action, could...