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Regional Seminar on Antipersonnel Landmine Victims

Bogotá, Colombia
12-14 November 2003

Executive Summary

More than 125 representatives from across the Hemisphere met in Bogotá from November 12 through 14, 2003 to take part in the “Regional Seminar on Antipersonnel Landmine Victims,” sponsored by the Organization of American States Mine Action Program, the Mine Action Information Center of James Madison University and the Office of the Vice President of the Republic of Colombia, and made possible with financial support from the Department of State of the United States. The purpose of the seminar was two-fold. First, it aimed to bring together experts and practitioners in the field of victim assistance from national and local governments in mine-affected countries, donor nations, and nongovernmental and international organizations to share experiences and evaluate the possibility for new partnerships. In addition, several landmine survivors from throughout the Americas participated in the seminar, offering some unique perspectives on the issue.

Second, the Government of Colombia offered to host the event because of its intense interest in improving national capabilities for addressing the special challenges that confront landmine survivors. Colombia has reported more landmine victims than any country in the Hemisphere, and according to *Landmine Monitor*, all but two of the country’s 32 departments are now mine-affected. To date, the Colombian Antipersonnel Mine Observatory has identified and registered 2,515 landmine victims, of which at least 36% have been identified as civilian victims.

Due to the magnitude of this crisis, and the complexity of the landmine issue, the Government of Colombia has sought international assistance through the OAS Mine Action Program. In March of 2003, the OAS signed an agreement with the Colombian Government for the initiation of an assistance program for a comprehensive approach to mine action in the country. Because Colombia is believed to be the country with the greatest number of landmine victims in the Hemisphere, the seminar was given high priority for OAS support. Under the framework agreement, the OAS Mine Action Program has already provided advice and technical assistance to Colombia in the areas of mine-risk education, database development and mine stockpile destruction.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Francisco Santos Calderon, Vice President of the Republic of Colombia and President of the National Intersectorial Commission on Mine Action, highlighted the challenges confronting Colombia as it works to meet its obligations as a signatory to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Antipersonnel Mines and on their Destruction, commonly known as the Ottawa Convention. Speaking on behalf of the OAS Mine Action Program, Colonel (Ret.) William McDonough outlined the issues that the seminar would address, including data collection on mine victims, emergency and continuing medical care, physical and psychological rehabilitation, training and social reintegration, and program coordination. Mr. Dennis Barlow, director of the Mine Action Information Center at James Madison University, concluded the inauguration by calling on the participants to share their personal and institutional experiences with their counterparts from other nations and different institutions.

Representatives of mine-affected countries in the Americas – Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Peru - provided an overview of the landmine crisis in each of their countries, highlighting their capabilities and needs. Following their presentations, Captain (Ret.) Oscar Buitrago of Colombia and Mr. Richard Villadiego, both Colombian natives, offered personal testimonies about their life-changing experiences as landmine survivors. Their accounts provided insight into the pain, suffering, psychological trauma and challenges they have faced in undergoing the rehabilitation and reintegration processes needed to recover as productive members of society. They also

brought to light the lack of immediate medical attention that is available in many rural areas and the need to make landmine victims aware of their right to assistance from their governments.

Seminar activities included panel discussions incorporating leading experts in the fields of treatment, rehabilitation and training. Among the panelists were speakers from the Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining; James Madison University; Physicians for Human Rights; Central Military Hospital of Colombia; Queen's University of Canada; Integral Rehabilitation Center of Colombia (CIREC); the Health Services Unit of Health ECOPETROL, the Colombian national oil company; Landmine Survivors Network; the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines; World Rehabilitation Fund; National Demining Commission of Nicaragua; and Rotary Club of Colombia.

The panels were followed by three working groups which reflected the different topics discussed during the panel discussions. The group on "Data Collection" concluded that victim information collection should be decentralized and submitted to a centralized national authority where it must be verified according to established standards for data collection. A second working group on "Medical Care and Rehabilitation" identified requirements for immediate and continuing care of landmine victims as well as for educating family members of victims about the processes and facilities that they require. The third working group on "Social Reintegration" highlighted the need to take advantage of available national, regional and local capacities to provide psychological assistance, promote local survivors' networks, and enhance public and employer awareness about landmine survivors' capabilities as means of improving their socio-economic reintegration.

The seminar concluded with a presentation of regional perspectives from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of the Canadian Government, United Nations Development Program, and United States Agency for International Development. In closing the three-day seminar, Mr. Tomas Concha Sanz, Vice Director of the Colombian Government's Human Rights Program, reiterated the commitment of his government to assist the landmine victims and work toward eliminating this threat to the civilian population.

The regional seminar afforded participants the good opportunity to share their views on regional landmine issues, as well as on projects that they are implementing or planning to implement. Participants had the opportunity to exchange ideas in best practices and lessons learned in this important humanitarian field. The gathering also helped broaden and strengthen existing networks of cooperation between governmental, nongovernmental and international entities in a way that promises to produce new partnerships and projects that will benefit landmine survivors in Colombia and throughout the Americas.

Participants

| Nombre | Cargo y Organización | Información |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| ARGENTINA | | |
| Capitán de Corbeta Medico | Medico Especialista en Ortopedia | Phone: (5411) 4773-7917 4901-9574 |
| José Alberto Montivero | Estado Mayor Conjunto de las Fuerzas Armadas Argentinas | Fax: (5411) 4346-8681 E-mail: gramonti56@hotmail.com Montivero57@hotmail.com |
| CANADÁ | | |
| Dr. William Boyce | Director Queen's University SPEC group | Phone: (613) 533-6000 ext. 77405 Fax: (613) 533-2556 E-mail: boycew@post.queensu.ca |
| Mr. David Chaplin | Program Coordinator Américas and Europe Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Mine Action Team (DFAIT/ILX) | Phone: (613) 996-6292 Fax: (613) 944-2501 E-mail: David.chaplin@dfait-maeci.gc.ca |
| Dr. Gustavo Vargas | International Project Manager Queen's University SPEG group | Phone: (613) 843-9691 Fax: (613) 843-9691 E-mail: guscanadainc@rogers.com |
| CHILE | | |
| Coronel Rafael Guerra Ibarra | Comisión Nacional de Desminado Oficial del Estado Mayor Ejercito de Chile | Phone: (56-2) 280-5644 Fax: (56-2) 280-5644 E-mail: seconade@emdn.cl |

Capitán Pablo Núñez Baeza Comisión Nacional de Desminado Phone: (56-2) 280-5644
Ejercito de Chile Fax: (56-2) 280-5644

E-mail: seconade@emdn.cl

COLOMBIA

Dr. Francisco Santos Calderón Vicepresidente de la Republica Phone: (571) 444-2123
Fax: (571) 566-2387

Dr. Maria Victoria Garcia de Santos Doctora Phone: (571) 444-2123
Vicepresidencia Fax: (571)566-2387

Dr. Juan Manuel Uribe Asesor Phone: (571) 444-2123
Vicepresidencia Fax: (571) 566-2387

Dr. Carolina Cuevas Asesora Phone: (571) 444-2123
Vicepresidencia Fax: (571) 566-2387

Dr. Miguel Camilo Ruiz Blanco Director Phone: (571) 444-2123
Cancilleria Fax: (571) 566-2387

General Alvaro Roman Bahamon Comando General Fuerzas Militares Phone: (571) 315-0111
Ministerio de Defensa

General Luis Francesco Cordova Inspector General Fuerzas Militares Phone: (571) 315-0111
Ministerio de Defensa

Captain Rodrigo Cepeda Asencio Comandante Phone: (571) 1-446-8011
Escuela de Ingenieros Militares

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Dr. Luis Fernando Correa | Coordinador | Phone: (571) 336-5066 |
| | Grupo de Atención de Emergencias y Desastres | |
| | Ministerio de Protección Social | |
| Dr. Norbert Eduard Hurriago | Asesor Atención de Emergencias | Phone: (571) 336-5066 |
| | Ministerio de Protección Social | |
| Dra. Martha Ines Bohórquez Luke | Asesora | Phone: (571) 336-5066 |
| | Ministerio de Protección Social | |
| Dr. Mario Mejia | Gerente General | Phone: (571) 336-5066 |
| | Consorcio FISALUD | |
| Dr. Hilberto La Huerta | Asesor | Phone: (571) 596-0300 |
| | Departamento Nacional de Planeacion | |
| Dra. Ivette Altamar | Asesora | Phone: (571) 596-0330 |
| | Departamento Nacional de Planeacion | |
| Dra. Maria Del Socorro Valderrama | Asesora | Phone: (571) 348-6868 |
| | Fuerzas Militares | |
| Coronel Hipólito Herrera Carreño | Director de Sanidad | Phone: (571) 315-9000 |
| | Policía Nacional | |

| | | |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Dr. Luis Alfonso Hoyos | Director | Phone: (571) 283-5801 |
| | Red de Solidaridad Social | |
| Dra. Marlene Mesa | Jefe de Atención a Población Afectada por la Violencia Política | Phone: (571) 283-5801 |
| | Red de Solidaridad Social | |
| Dra. Piedad Zuccardi | Senadora | Phone: (571) 350-2127/1058 |
| | Senado de la Republica | |
| Dr. Diego Gonzalez | Asesor | Phone: (571) 350-2127/1058 |
| | Senado de la Republica | |
| Dr. Alberto Cuellar Ibañez | Director Ejecutivo | Phone: (571) 245-7727 |
| | CONFEPAZ | Fax: (571) 245-7727 |
| | | Email: confepaz99@hotmail.com |
| Dra. Isabel Rivera | Asesora | Phone: (571) 245-7727 |
| | CONFEPAZ | Fax: (571) 245-7727 |
| | | Email: confepaz99@hotmail.com |
| Dra. Jannette Perry de Saravia | Presidenta Fundadora | Phone: (571) 311-3639/3517 |
| | Fundación CIREC | Fax: (571) 544-3311 |
| | | Email: fcirec@colomsat.net.co |
| Dra. Erika Oviedo | Asesora | Phone: (571) 311-3584 |
| | Fundación CIREC | Fax: (571) 544-3311 |

| | | |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Dr. Jorge Quesada | Asesor Fundación CIREC | Phone: (571) 311-4808 Fax: (571) 544-3311 |
| Dr. Rafael Pardo | Director General de Salud Cruz Roja | Phone: (571) 676-0443 |
| Dra. Carlina Maldonado de Lozano | Secretaria General SENA SENA Regional Cundinamarca | Phone: (571) 546-1500 Fax: (571) 212-4688 |
| Dr. Eduardo Mariño | Asesor Dirección General SENA | Phone: (571) 546-1500, Ext. 2806 Fax: (571) 212-4688 Email: emarino@sena.edu.co |
| Dra. Constanza Monsalve | Asesora Desarrollo Empresarial SENA | Phone: (571) 546-1500 Fax: (571) 212-4688 |
| Dra. Julia Piñeres de Gutierrez | Directora de Empleo SENA | Phone: (571) 546-1500 Fax: (571) 212-4688 |
| Dra. Marlen Gutierrez | Asesora de Asuntos Territoriales | Phone: (571) 566-1600 |
| Sra. Monica Ildge | Ministerio del Interior Directora General para la Reinsercion Ministerio del Interior | Phone: (571) 566-1600 |
| Dr. Luis Carlos Restrepo | Alto Comisionado para la Paz | Phone: (571) 336-2509 |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Dra. Maria Victoria Mikan | Especializada en Derechos Humanos | Phone: (571) 570-2000 ext. 1053 |
| | Fiscalia General de la Nación | |
| Dra. Piedad Roman | Asesora | Phone: (571) 336-0011 |
| | Procuraduría | |
| Dra. Patricia Linares Prieto | Asesora Delegada para la Defensa del Menos y la Familia | Phone: (571) 336-0011 |
| | Procuraduría | |
| Dr. Fabio Hipólito Mariño | Asesor | Phone: (571) 382-1300 |
| | Ministerio de Ambiente Vivienda y Desarrollo Territorial | |
| Dra. Luz Mila Cardona | Subdirectora de Intervenciones Directas | Phone: (571) 205-6468 |
| | Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) | |
| Dr. Julian Aguirre | Coordinador | Phone: (571) 205-6468 |
| | Grupo de Atención a Victimas de la Violencia, Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) | |
| Dr. Hugo Gamboa | Asesor General | |
| | Dirección de Prevención y Atención de Desastres | |
| Iman. Julian Arturo | | |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| Zapata Feliciano | Director | Phone: (571) 244-7523/335-0364 |
| | Diálogo Interreligioso | Fax: (571) 244-9824 |
| | Centro Cultural Islámico | Email: centroculturalislamico@hotmail.com ccultislamico@007mundo.com |
| Dra. Fanny Ochoa Ochoa | Directora de Investigación | Phone: (571) 244-7523/335-0364 |
| | Diálogo Interreligioso | Fax: (571) 244-9824 |
| | Centro Cultural Islámico | Email: centroculturalislamico@hotmail.com ccultislamico@007mundo.com |
| Dr. Edwin Francisco Duarte | Asistente General | Phone: (571) 244-7523/335-0364 |
| | Diálogo Interreligioso | Fax: (571) 244-9824 |
| | Centro Cultural Islámico | Email: centroculturalislamico@hotmail.com ccultislamico@007mundo.com |
| Brigadier General Augusto Bahamon Dussan | Asesor Universidad Militar Nueva Granada | |
| Dra. Liliana Vargas | Asesora Ministerio de Educación | |
| Dra. Olga Lucia Estrada | Jefe de Rehabilitación TELETON | Phone: (571) 861-7777 |
| Dr. Armando Carvajal | Director Científico TELETON | Phone: (571) 861-7777 |
| Dr. Jose Julio Tobar | Secretario de Gobierno Gobernación Cauca | Phone: (571) 824-4613 |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Dr. Cesar Arévalo | Consultor | Phone: (571) 677-6951 |
| Dr. Luis Alfonso Fajardo | Director Fundación Consultores Asociados | Phone: (571) 287-1367 |
| Dra. Paola Garcia | Asesora Fundación Consultores Asociados | Phone: (571) 287-1367 |
| Dra. Constanza Ardila | Presidenta CEDAVIDA | Phone: (571) 313-4831 |
| Dra. Rocio Castro | Coordinadora Proyectos CEDAVIDA | Phone: (571) 205-6468 |
| Dr. Diego Andres Rosselli | Director del Servicio de Prótesis y Amputados Facultad de Medicina de la Universidad Militar Nueva Granada | |
| Dra. Catalina Giraldo Lecontte | Directora Ejecutiva Corporación Matamoros | Phone: (571) 617-9788 Fax: (571) 271-2745 Email: corpomatamoros@sky.net.co |
| Dra. Leonor Cuadros | Jefe de Gestión Social Corporación Matamoros | Phone: (571) 661-7978 |
| Dra. Martha Aristizabal | Directora Ejecutiva GLRP – Grupo Latinoamericano | Phone: (571) 608-2255 E-mail: glarp@cable.net.co |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| | Coordinadora Técnica | Phone: (571) 608-2255 |
| Dra. Janett Bernal | GLARP | E-mail: glarp@cable.net.co |
| Dra. Diana Babativa | Psicóloga de Programas Institucionales Departamento D1 EMC Comando General FFMM | Phone: (571) 266-0121 |
| Dr. Jaime Alvaro Fajardo | Secretario de Participación Ciudadana Gobernación de Antioquia | Phone: (571) 262-1914 |
| Dra. Lilibeth Arismendy | Coodrinadora Observatorio de Minas Regional Antioquio Gobernación de Antioquia | Phone: (571) 262-1914 |
| Dr. Edgar Moreno | Director GSMMA | Phone: (571) 549-6426 E-mail: gsmma@terra.com.co |
| Dra. Martha Stella Camacho | Comunicadora PROLLANOS | Phone: (571) 424-1613 E-mail: marthaes@latinmail.com |
| Dr. Jorge Rivas Lora | Profesor Universidad Militar | Phone: (571) 417-5095 E-mail: tely2p@hotmail.com |
| Dr. Gerardo Barajas | Promotor Social Iglesia Luterana | Phone: (571) 543-0105 E-mail: ofantrol@ielco.org |
| Dr. Alejandro Mora | Profesional Universitario Ministerio del Interior y de Justicia | Phone: (571) 596-0500 E-mail: amora@minjusticia.gov.co |

| | | |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Dr. Juan Carlos Lopez | Profesional Universitario Ministerio del Interior y de Justicia | Phone: (571) 596-0500 E-mail: jlopez@minjusticia.gov.co |
| Dra. Maria Elizabeth Londoño | Profesional Universitario Ministerio del Interior y de Justicia | Phone: (571) 385-9030 E-mail: elizalondoño@terra.com.co |
| Dr. Fernando Serrano Bonnito | Jefe Servicio Amputados – Prótesis Hospital Militar Central de Colombia | Phone: (571) 213-9399 E-mail: fesebon@hotmail.com |
| Dra. Adriana Milena Soto | Asesora Consejería de Paz Departamento del Meta Gobernación del Meta | Phone: (571) 8-671-4370 E-mail: milesoto@hotmail.com |
| Dra. Jeannette A. Mendez | Profesora Universidad Nacional | Phone: (571) 316-5496 E-mail: jamandam@hotmail.com |
| Dra. Angela Castro | Asesora Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas | Phone: (571) 652-0032 E-mail: angelamaria@hotmail.com |
| Dr. Alvaro Jiménez Millan | Coordinador Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas | Phone: (310) 322-1530 E-mail: cccminas@cccminas.org.co |
| Dr. Camilo Serna | Asesor Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas | Phone: (310) 322-1526 E-mail: cccminas@cccminas.org.co |

| | | |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Dra. Maria Inés Bohórquez | Coordinadora Grupo Discapacidad Ministerio de Protección Social | Phone: (571) 336-5066 ext. 1200 E-mail: mbohorquez@minproteccionsocial.gov.co |
| Dra. Alexandra Kandia | Fisioterapeuta Universidad del Rosario | Phone: (571) 416-2153 E-mail: bengybet15@hotmail.com |
| Capitán Rodrigo Cepeda Asencio | Jefe Departamento Ejercito Nacional | Phone: (571) 446-9060 E-mail: rodrigocepeda1@hotmail.com |
| Dr. Jaime Arzuaga | Jefe de Salud Operacional Direccion de Sanidad Policía Nacional | Phone: (571) 220-7512 E-mail: armal@policia.gov.co |
| Dra. Maria Cristina Franco | Profesional Universitaria Área de Salud Gobernación de Antioquia Direccion Seccion de Salud | Phone: (571) 385-7841 E-mail: mfranco@gobant.gov.co |
| Dra. Maria Judith Puerta Cardona | Profesional Universitaria Gerente de Información Gobernación de Antioquia Dirección Sección de Salud | Phone: (571) 385-7894 E-mail: mpuertac@gobant.gov.co |

Dr. Ruben Dario Restrepo Jefe del Departamento de Policlínica
Hospital Universitario San Vicente de Paul
Phone: (571) 268-4534
E-mail: rdrv@elhospital.org.co

Dra. Piedad Román Ospina Asesora
Procuraduría General de la Nación
Phone: (571) 336-0011 ext. 11700
E-mail: piaromanos@hotmail.com

Dr. Jorge Riveros Consultor del Sistema Habitacional
Ministerio de Ambiente, Vivienda y Desarrollo Territorial
Phone: (571) 288-9860
E-mail: joriveros@minambiente.gov.co

Dr. Hernan Estrada Hernández Presidente
CAMINAR
Phone: (571) 522-5953
Fax: (571) 522-5953
E-mail: caminar@cable.net.co
hernane@andinet.com

Dra. Nydia Teresa Peralta Trabajadora Social
Batallon de Sanidad
Phone: (571) 446- 9503

Dra. Débora Oñate Programa Paz
USAID
Phone: (571) 423-6880
E-mail: donate@usaid.gov

Dr. Tomas Concha Coordinador de Área de Políticas
Programa Presidencial Derechos Humanos
Phone: (571) 334-5077
E-mail: tomasconcha@presidencia.gov.co

Dra. Beatriz Elena Gutierrez Rueda Coordinadora
Observatorio de Minas
Phone: (571) 334-5077
E-mail: bgutierr@presidencia.gov.co

Antipersonal

Dra. Adriana Amaris Coordinadora del Phone: (571) 334-5077
Componente de
Emergencias E-mail: adrianaamaris@presidencia.gov.co
Humanitarias

Observatorio de Minas
Antipersonal

Dra. Luz Dary Bejarano Coordinadora del Phone: (571) 334-5077
Componente de
Prevención E-mail: ibejarano@presidencia.gov.co

Observatorio de Minas
Antipersonal

Dr. Oscar Buitrago Asesor Phone: (571) 334-5077
E-mail: map@presidencia.gov.co

Componente de
Promoción y Monitoreos
de los Discapacitados de
la Población Afectada
por la Presencia de MAP
y UXO

Observatorio de Minas
Antipersonal

Dr. Fernando Guevara Asesor Phone: (571) 334-5077
E-mail: fguevara@presidencia.gov.co

Componente de Gestión
de Información

Observatorio de Minas
Antipersonal

Dra. Maria Paulina Coordinadora del Phone: (571) 334-5077
Lozano Componente de
Promoción y Monitoreos
de los Discapacitados de
la Población Afectada
por la Presencia de MAP
y UXO E-mail: mlozano@presidencia.gov.co

Observatorio de Minas
Antipersonal

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Dra. Maria Elvira Molano | Asesora | Phone: (571) 334-5077 |
| | Componente de Prevención | E-mail: mmolano@presidencia.gov.co |
| Dra. Mariany Monroy | | Phone: (571) 334-5077 |
| | Coordinadora del Componente de Gestión de Información | E-mail: marianymonroy@presidencia.gov.co |
| Dra. Sandra Morello | Asistente de la Coordinación | Phone: (571) 334-5077 |
| | Observatorio de Minas Antipersonal | E-mail: sandramorello@presidencia.gov.co |
| Dr. Dario Ospina | Asesor | Phone: (571) 334-5077 |
| | Componente de Gestión de Información | E-mail: map@presidencia.gov.co |
| | Observatorio de Minas Antipersonal | |
| Dra. Ana Luisa Torres | Asesora | Phone: (571) 334-5077 |
| | Componente de Gestión de Información | E-mail: anatorres@presidencia.gov.co |
| | Observatorio de Minas Antipersonal | |
| Dra. Maria Margarita Vega | Asesora | Phone: (571) 334-5077 |
| | Componente de Gestión de Información | E-mail: map@presidencia.gov.co |
| | Observatorio de Minas Antipersonal | |
| Dra. Sandra Velasco | Asesora | Phone: (571) 334-5077 |
| | Componente de | E-mail: sandravelasco@presidencia.gov.co |

Prevención

Observatorio de Minas
Antipersonal

Dra. Gloria Sánchez

Secretaria
Administrativa

Phone: (571) 334-5077

E-mail: map@presidencia.gov.co

Observatorio de Minas
Antipersonal

Dr. Jose Rodolfo Muñoz

Medico y Antropólogo
Forense

Universidad Nacional

Dr. Jorge Alberto Velez

Coordinador

Servicios de Salud

ECOPETROL, Cali

Sr. Pedronel Aristizábal
Cardona

Club de Rotarios

Phone: (571) 623-3234

Colombia

Fax: (571) 623-6314/6325

E-mail: paristizabal@energeticos.com.co

ECUADOR

Dra. Helena Yáñez

Diplomática

Phone: (593-2) 299-3259

Ministerio de Relaciones
Exteriores

Fax: (593-2) 299-3260

E-mail:

dgsoblim@mrrree.gov.ec helenayanez@hotmail.com

Sr. Nelson Castillo

Programa de Accion
Integral Contra Las
Minas Antipersonal de la
OEA

Phone: (593-2) 252- 2259

Fax: (593-2) 223- 9820

E-mail: ncastillo@aicma-ec.org

AICMA/OEA

EL SALVADOR

Sr. Jesús Martínez Director Phone: (503) 260-1684

Landmine Survivors (503) 275-8263
Network

Fax: (503) 275-8264

E-mail: lsn_es@telesal.net

Lsn_Jesús@telesal.net

Lic. Lourdes Barrera de Psicóloga Phone: (503) 228-4018
Morales

CONAIPD (503) 229-5529

Fax: (503) 229-5382

E-mail: sejconaipd@telesal.net

GUATEMALA

Sr. Sandino Asturias Coordinador de los Phone: (502) 362-0253/4/5/6
Valenzuela Desmovilizados de la
URNG y Miembro de la
Unidad de Coordinación
Ejecutiva de la Comisión
Coordinadora del
Desminado del Congreso
de la Republica :

Fax: (502) 332-0101

Sr. Guillermo Pacheco Arquitecto Phone: (502) 362-0253/4/5/6

Coordinador Nacional Fax: (502) 332-0101

AICMA/OEA E-mail: gpacheco@inteln.net.gt

Sr. Jhony Cabrera Perez Coordinador Ejecutivo Phone: (502) 362-0253/4/5/6
de la Unidad de
Coordinación Ejecutiva
de la Comisión
Coordinadora del
Desminado del Congreso
de la Republica Fax: (502) 332-0101

E-mail: jhonycabrera@hotmail.com

HONDURAS

Dra. Maria Antonia Primer Secretario Phone: (571) 215-4259
Navarro

Embajada de Honduras E-mail: mnavarrob49@hotmail.com

NICARAGUA

Dr. Juan Umaña Loáisiga Abogado Phone: (505) 228- 2027

Coordinador Fax: (505) 222-5500

Comisión Nacional de Desminado E-mail: jumana@midef.gob.ni

Lic. Carlos Orozco Coordinador Nacional Phone: (505) 266-1251

PADCA/OEA Fax: (505) 266-0584

E-mail: oea_dmdo@ibw.com.ni

PERÚ

Dr. Wilyam Lúcar Aliaga Coordinador General Phone: (511) 426-4160

CONTRAMINAS Fax: (511) 426-4160

E-mail: wlucar@rree.gob.pe

Sr. Luiz Enrique Suarez Jefe Phone: (511) 311-2644

Departamento de Seguridad Internacional y Desarme Fax: (511) 311-2641

E-mail: lsuarez@rree.gob.pe

Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores

UNITED STATES

Mr. Thomas Johnson Director of the Program on Democratic Governability Phone: (571) 423-6880 ext. 144

USAID Fax: (571) 423-6862

Email: tjohnson@usaid.gov

Ms. Mélanie Anderton Political Officer Phone: (571) 383-2687

United States Embassy Fax: (571) 383-2150

Bogota, Colombia E-mail: andertonm@state.gov

Dr. Jack Victor President Emeritus Phone: (212) 725-7875

World Rehabilitation Fund Fax: (212) 725-8402

E-mail: jvictor@worldrehabfund.org

Jbv811@aol.com

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Dr. Adam L. Kushner MD, MPH | General Surgeon Physician for Human Right | Phone: (917) 6697-4040 E-mail: adamkushner@yahoo.com |
| OAS Colonel (R) William McDonough | General Coordinator AICMA/OAS | Phone: 202-458-3524 FaxL 202-458-3545 E-mail: wmcdonough@oas.org |
| Colonel (R) Carl Case | Senior Specialist AICMA/OAS | Phone: 202-458-3631 Fax: 202-458-3545 E-mail: ccase@oas.org |
| Capitán (R) Jorge E. Cepeda | Specialist AICMA/OAS | Phone: 202-458-3851 Fax: 202-458-3545 E-mail: jcepeda@oas.org |
| Sr. Juan Carlos Ruan | Specialist AICMA/OAS | Phone: 202-458-6912 Fax: 202-458-3545 E-mail: jruan@oas.org |
| Ms. Tammy Hall | National Coordinator, AICMA-Colombia, OEA | Phone: (571) 566-6142 Email: tammy.hall@cable.net.co |
| MAIC/JMU Mr. Dennis Barlow | Director Mine Action Information Center James Madison University | Phone: (540) 568-2756 Fax: (540) 568-8176 E-mail: barlowdc@jmu.edu |

Dr. Suzanne Fiederlein Project Manager

Mine Action Information Center

James Madison University

Phone: (540) 568-2715
Fax: (540) 568-8176
E-mail: fiedersl@jmu.edu

Mr. Nicholas MacNeil Research Associate

Mine Action Information Center

James Madison University

Phone: (540) 568-2718
Fax: (540) 568-8176
E-mail: macneinc@jmu.edu
nmacneil@earthlink.net

GICHD
Mr. Simon Berger Coordinador Regional

America Latina

Geneva International Center for Humanitarian Demining

Phone: (505) 885-0080
Fax: (505) 266-0584
E-mail: s.berger@gichd.ch

UNDP

Mr. Pontus Ohrstedt Oficial de Programas del PNUD (UNDP) Colombia

Phone: (571) 488-9000
E-mail: pontus.ohrstedt@undp.org

