

The Colombian HD Workshop: Developing a Plan of Action

Four decades of near-continuous conflict between non-state actors and government forces have left Colombia with an extensive, deadly legacy. Landmines, improvised explosive devices and other explosive ordnance litter the countryside, and casualty rates remain among the highest in the world. As conflict has subsided, Colombia has begun the challenging task of addressing and gathering information on problems caused by explosive remnants of war.

by Geary Cox II [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

The widespread problems of landmines and other ERW in Colombia have been addressed in various ways. Depending on the region's security situation, mine action has been undertaken by Colombian military forces, government agencies or not at all. As the security situation has improved nationally, government authorities and military forces have been jointly planning and implementing mine-action activities. This easing in tension has also allowed for the planning of expanded demining and information-gathering capacities. In early June 2009, representatives from Colombia's presidential mine-action authority, the *Programa Presidencial para la Acción Integral contra Minas Antipersonal* (the Presidential Program for Comprehensive Action Against Anti-personnel Landmines or PAICMA), and the Colombian military met to plan for these activities.

The Workshop

Sponsored by the Bureau of Political Military Affairs Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State and facilitated by the Mine Action Information Center at James Madison University, the *Taller de Planificación del Desminado Humanitario en Colombia* (Colombia Humanitarian Demining Planning Workshop)

convened in Bogotá 9–12 June 2009. More than 40 representatives from the U.S. and Colombian governments, international organizations, national mine-action authorities, and key stakeholders in Colombia's work against landmines and other ERW attended.

The workshop opened with speeches from Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos Calderón and the Director of PAICMA, Andrés Dávila. Both stressed the importance of fostering cooperation among military forces, national authorities and international partners, and of developing a plan of action that would integrate and expand demining capabilities. The speeches emphasized not only the urgency of the situation facing Colombia, but also the increasing opportunities for mine-action practitioners to work innovatively and collectively.

Officials from PAICMA and the Humanitarian Demining Department of the Colombian Armed Forces then presented on the country's mine-clearance program and its planned expansion. Currently, Colombia has three demining teams operating around military bases and three operating in the Antioquia, Meta and Nariño departments. Each team consists of 45 personnel and during 2009, PAICMA plans to train an additional three teams. These new teams will begin operating in 2010 in the Bolívar, Tolima and Valle del Cauca departments.

Also during 2010, five teams will be trained and will begin operations in the Arauca, Caldas, Caquetá, Norte de Santander and Putumayo departments. By 2011, demining and information gathering will be undertaken by the full cohort of teams (including the three teams reallocated from demining military bases) in the 14 "high risk" departments.

Issue Development

After detailing the history of Colombian mine action and outlining plans for the future, workshop participants' briefings turned to lessons learned and best practices for mine-action situations like Colombia's. U.S. State Department consultant Murf McCloy presented on mine-clearance prioritization, survey and land release—specifically how planning and execution can be affected by an insecure environment. (Complicating elements for clearance and survey in Colombia are ongoing conflict and recently defused tensions.) Steve Priestley, Director for International Projects at Mines Advisory Group, briefed on the lessons MAG has learned in its community-liaison program.

The first day closed with a PM/WRA-hosted reception, and the proceedings reconvened on the second day with a briefing by Mohammad Breikat, Director of Jordan's National Committee for Demining and Rehabilitation. NCDR is a success story for mine-action cooperation among civilian agencies, military personnel and nongovernmental organizations, having integrated resources and capabilities into a productive national effort. Finally, Joe Donahue, Chief Executive Officer of Information Management and Mine Action Programs



Plaza de Bolívar in downtown Bogotá, Colombia, during a placid afternoon.

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(iMMAP), talked about techniques and practices for data collection and information management.

The presenters on best practices and lessons learned were available to provide advice, perspective and encouragement as participants began the most difficult part of the workshop: issue development and refinement of a plan of action.

Working Groups and Discussion

Two working groups were formed—one that focused on the information requirements for setting priorities and planning operations, and another that discussed the command-and-control requirements for demining operations and the security requirements for activities. Both groups addressed force development, training needs and resources required to conduct operations.

Working groups were not constrained to any rigid boundaries implied by the groups' focus areas; instead, both groups were prompted to cast a wide net in proposing ideas. Facilitators had developed two lists of preliminary questions intended to spark discussion, and the working groups began by considering these. Both groups soon departed from the prepared discussion points as members of each considered the problems facing each area, the resources needed to address them, a way to begin doing so, and the primary agency or agencies that could take the lead. As each issue was debated, the working groups were encouraged to establish several goals and, if appropriate, set a preliminary timetable for accomplishing each goal. Groups also considered what resources and training would be required to implement proposed actions.

Time to prepare presentations for the combined group was extended because both groups were having such fruitful discussions. The working groups took the extra time to develop consensus points—those issues on which the group did not reach consensus (because of a lack of time or the need for more thorough consideration) were labeled as areas of concern meriting further discussion.

The Plan of Action

When the working groups reconvened in the plenary session, there was an encouraging level of agreement between the two groups about the pertinent issues facing Colombian mine action and how to address them. The workshop facilitators encouraged the plenary group to preserve redundancies because they offered a more complete understanding of the complicated mine-action picture in Colombia. Participants recognized the following items of concern in the Plan of Action:

Growth consideration for demining platoons. Over the next three years, there will be an estimated growth from six to 14 demining platoons. Plans will be required for addressing equipment needs, as well as costs associated with sustaining and maintaining this expanded capacity.

Mechanical enhancements. As the demining capacity increases, there will be a need to integrate mechanical capabilities where possible.

Prioritization of work areas. Stakeholders in Colombia need to prioritize work areas and coordinate with relevant organizations, develop updated area impact studies, establish milestones based on increases in demining platoons' capabilities, and ensure the appropriate employment of units. Impact Survey teams will need training so they can confirm information. An integrated approach to processing and disseminating this information will also need to be established.

Resource mobilization. The working group members emphasized the need to develop an overview of the resource requirements by sector for the next three years. The overview will be useful in securing donor assistance. The base financial needs of PAICMA will be included, as well as additional costs from impact studies, new mechanical tools, mine-detecting dogs, and other human resources and capabilities.

Mine-detecting dogs. MDDs are an important component of expanded demining capabilities. The Colombian military already employs MDDs in military operations, but there is a need to adapt and improve the capacity for humanitarian demining.

Command and control: National, integrated mechanisms for command and control must be strengthened to allow PAICMA and the military command to adapt more quickly to the changing needs of the demining platoons, and to better accommodate expansions of the program.



Deminers in protective gear.
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Information gathering. Barriers in the information-gathering process need to be broken down, including problems posed by security, geography and a lack of resources. Data currently available cannot be corroborated, collated or integrated. A channel between the military and other information centers should be created to facilitate information sharing, and information should be analyzed for accuracy and relevancy.

Incorporating IMSMA. The Information Management System for Mine Action was recognized as vital to effective demining activities. Information being added to IMSMA is overseen by PAICMA, but will soon be available to other stakeholders. PAICMA is leading efforts to verify this information and has made it available on its Web site, <http://www.accioncontraminas.gov.co>.

Effective use of information. Primary information is not always available in the field, so a clear understanding of the sites that should be demined is not always available. Protocols for verifying information should be standardized.

Information requirements for planning operations and priority setting. While the main prioritization tool for operations is the information in IMSMA, the secondary resource will certainly be communities returning to their lands. Criteria are needed for prioritization (security, geography, land use), and adequate information will be needed to implement these criteria when planning operations commence.

Planning for additional survey teams. As more platoons are created, there must be a simultaneous increase in the number of survey teams. These new teams should employ a mixture of General and Technical Survey methodologies, with NGOs possibly providing supplementary support to military teams (activities should be coordinated through PAICMA).

Integrating community liaisons. Community liaisons were seen as a vital component for humanitarian demining. Although a structure for such a system is not yet ready, participants were interested in a hybridized civilian/military approach in the interim.

Coordinating victim assistance, clearance, mine-risk education and platoon activities. There are numerous information mechanisms for coordinating the listed activities, but none of them are comprehensive. Department committees, national information tables, the Intersectorial Commission for Action against AP Mines, and other venues provide important but limited opportunities for coordination. PAICMA will look

to establish a regular venue for interaction and coordination.

The framework Plan of Action shows the complexities and interrelated nature of mine-action efforts in Colombia. Participants were committed to suggesting ways forward for as many topics as possible, and emphasis was placed on recognizing

landmine survivor assistance and advocacy organizations and landmine survivors. Displays of demining equipment, prostheses, and other humanitarian-assistance tools filled the lobby, and attendees could view these items and learn more about the multifaceted assistance programs at work in Colombia.



MAIC Director Dennis Barlow addresses dignitaries and workshop participants.
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stakeholder organizations for leadership and future collaboration. The plenary session discussed and approved the next steps and follow-up opportunities to sustain and monitor the implementation of the Plan of Action. The full text of the Plan of Action is available in Spanish and English on the MAIC Web site: <http://tinyurl.com/ygumko>.

Presenting the Plan

The 13-point Plan of Action the working groups developed was formally presented the following day at a closing session attended by about 100 dignitaries and representatives from mine-action organizations, diplomatic missions to Colombia,

After discussing the framework Plan of Action regarding the deployment of expanded mine-clearance capacities, Pablo Parra Gallego, Director of the Humanitarian Demining section for PAICMA, discussed next steps, addressed the challenges involved in post-clearance community development, and spoke about the role of government agencies, international organizations and NGOs in mobilizing resources and developing plans for Colombia.

PAICMA Director Andrés Dávila spoke about his organization's continuing work to improve mine-action integration in Colombia and to solicit international interest in Colombia's progress. Dennis Barlow, Director of



U.S. Ambassador to Colombia William Brownfield speaks to closing-day attendees.

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the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery, emphasized the workshop's important steps toward a formalized roadmap with achievable goals and clearly delineated steps.

The closing session was addressed by William Brownfield, U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, and Sergio Jaramillo, Colombian Vice Minister of Defense. Both speakers stressed the importance of further developing an integrated approach to demining that incorporates resources and skills from governmental, military and independent organizations. Speaking in Spanish, Ambassador Brownfield underscored the importance of humanitarian mine action as Colombia recovers from its war-torn past. The ambassador also highlighted the workshop's relevance in light of the upcoming Cartagena Summit on a

Mine-free World (24 November–4 December 2009).

Moving Forward

With such a positive response to the Plan of Action and the energy suffusing the conference, there was a near-universal call for follow-on activities to commence as quickly as possible.

The workshop helped build momentum for Colombia's mine-action programs, attracting attention to achievements while helping jump start future work. Participants agreed to share more information, meet more frequently, and collaborate more closely on projects. The workshop's Plan of Action will hopefully serve as a call for greater synergy and cooperation as Colombia's demining capacity expands. ♦

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