



Director's Letter Editorial Focus Feature Notes Special Report Making it Personal Book Reviews R & D Obituaries

Organization of American States Coordination Activities

By Megan Sarian [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

The Organization of American States has come a long way in its 61-year history, effectively organizing its member states to promote humanitarian demining among Western nations. After assisting Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and Suriname in becoming "mine free," the OAS is continuing to fund mine-action efforts, and is currently conducting projects in Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Peru.

The Organization of American States formed in 1948 when 21 nations of the Western Hemisphere gathered to formalize their dedication to human rights and the democratic ideals of each nation. The OAS gradually strengthened its humanitarian influence in the hemisphere by establishing decision-making bodies and participating in meetings with important leaders of the region.¹

While not operated strictly under the OAS, the Summits of the Americas (periodic meetings between heads of states and governments in the Americas) have played a crucial role in reforming the goals of the OAS. The catalyst of this change occurred at the end of the Cold War when the Summits' participants realized their priorities had shifted from political change to security interests. In 1994, the Summit process changed its focus to democracy, free markets and multilateral cooperation among nations. Soon after, the OAS also adopted this focus, becoming the region's leading multilateral forum for advocating human rights, supporting democracy, and fighting against poverty, corruption, terrorism and illegal drugs.²

The organization's General Assembly, established in 1970, helps implement these ideals through devising and carrying out major policies within the OAS.¹ Its Permanent Council assists the General Assembly in executing these decisions and upholding unity among member states.³

Since its inception, the OAS has grown to include 35 member states of the Western Hemisphere, and has played a major role in advancing human rights throughout the region.⁴ The mine-action community in particular is one sector that continues to benefit from OAS activity.

Mine Action Involvement

In 1991, the OAS created the program now known as *Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal* to assist Central American countries in ridding their nations of anti-personnel mines.⁵ Although AICMA began as a program to eradicate AP mines in Central America, its activities have since expanded to all of the Western Hemisphere and include the destruction of munitions, explosive remnants of war, and small arms.⁶

Carrying out duties assigned by the General Assembly, AICMA has a number of responsibilities include demining activities, preventive education, victim assistance, stockpiled mine destruction, creating a mine-action databank and preventing the proliferation of AP mines. The Inter-American Defense Board, a specialized entity of the OAS, is an international committee of nationally appointed defense officials that provides technical support to AICMA. Together, the IADB and AICMA place monitors and supervisors in affected areas in order to provide technical assistance to these countries.⁷

With help from AICMA, Costa Rica declared itself "mine free" in December 2002⁸ and Honduras made the same declaration in October 2004.⁹ Suriname and Guatemala followed close behind with their mine-clearance efforts and



Ecuadoran Army deminers conduct a medical-evacuation exercise in the jungle region along Peru-Ecuador border. Photo courtesy of AICMA-EC



A Colombian Army deminer sets charges to destroy an improvised landmine laid by insurgent forces in San Carlos, Antioquia. Photo courtesy of AICMA-EC

became "mine free" in April and December 2005, respectively.¹⁰

Ecuador and Peru began receiving demining assistance from the OAS in 2001. The OAS contributed aid to Ecuador by supplying funds for mine clearance and victim rehabilitation, and began collaborating with *Centro de Desminado del Ecuador* to develop a national humanitarian-demining plan.¹¹ In Peru, the OAS provided support for mine-clearance activities, training for deminers in the National Police and Army, and mine clearance on the Ecuador-Peru border. The OAS also provided limited assistance with clearance operations in areas around high-tension electricity towers.¹²

In March 2003, the OAS General Secretariat and the government of Colombia signed an Agreement of Cooperation and Technical Assistance in an effort to organize international assistance for mine action in Colombia. The OAS supported Colombia as the country developed standard operating procedures for mine clearance and established a humanitarian-demining capacity within the Colombian Armed Forces.¹³

Current Activities

Victim assistance. Since 1997, the OAS has supported the physical and psychological rehabilitation of more than 1,120 registered landmine accident survivors in Nicaragua. In addition, AICMA has worked in coordination with *Instituto Nacional Tecnológico* (INATEC) of Nicaragua to offer vocational training in 27 different jobs and specialties to 217 survivors to assist in their socioeconomic reintegration. Also, 225 survivors have been provided with micro-enterprise grants, bringing the total number of survivors who have received support to 442.¹⁴ The OAS offered support to 47 Honduran survivors through a landmine-victim-assistance project. The project helped provide physical and psychological rehabilitation for survivors. The OAS continues to assist Honduran landmine victims by providing transportation, meals, and lodging at treatment centers in Honduras and Nicaragua, according to the victims' needs.¹⁵

The OAS has partnered with the *Centro Integral de Rehabilitación de Colombia* for a project aimed at improving the socioeconomic condition of landmine victims and disabled persons in Colombia. CIREC proposed the Partnership in Opportunities for Employment through Technology in the Americas in hopes of giving participants a competitive edge in the job market by teaching them computer skills. The OAS Trust for the Americas joined Seeds of Hope groups (a network created by CIREC currently connecting volunteers to 42 landmine-stricken municipalities) and Microsoft® to implement this project, which ran from January 2009 through

December 2009.¹⁶

The OAS has helped provide rehabilitation services for Peruvian and Ecuadorian landmine victims, and supported more than 35 landmine survivors in Colombia. Colombian victims received diagnostic evaluations, training courses from the National Learning Service and micro-financing for employment or agricultural projects through OAS assistance.

Mine-risk education. In 2006 and 2007, the OAS reached 18 Honduran communities close to the Nicaraguan border with MRE programs. The OAS plans to continue implementing MRE campaigns in Nicaragua through the end of 2010 to identify any residual areas of mine and unexploded-ordnance contamination.



OAS promoters conduct house-to-house mine-risk-education campaigns in San Francisco, Antioquia department, Colombia.

Photo courtesy of AICMA-EC

In 2008, the government of Italy contributed €56,615 (US\$83,586)¹⁷ to assist the OAS AICMA program's activities in Colombia. Part of these funds enabled the OAS to equip civilian leaders and help Colombian authorities to incorporate mine-risk education into humanitarian-demining operations throughout the country.¹⁸ Also, heavily mined Colombian communities will continue to receive MRE programs.¹⁵

Munitions destruction. In 2007, the OAS and international community helped investigate 18 reports of scattered mines and unexploded ordnance in Honduran communities. A total of seven mines and 49 other munitions found in these communities was destroyed. The OAS also supported a team of 10 deminers from the Armed Forces of Honduras by providing them with logistical and technical support.¹⁵ At the request of the Nicaraguan government, the OAS secured donor funding to support munitions destruction in 2007 and 2008. AICMA provided financial and logistical support for the destruction of 950 tons of obsolete

munitions located in four stockpiles throughout the country.¹⁴ In

Colombia, the OAS helped with planning and partial funding to destroy 18,000 small arms and light weapons turned in by demobilized parliamentary forces.¹⁵

Mine clearance. The OAS program will continue to help Nicaragua work toward completing its National Demining Plan in 2009. The main demining operations will finish by April 2010, but residual help will be needed to address reports of leftover mines and UXO discovered by Nicaraguan communities. A team of 45 Nicaraguan deminers will be available for residual-clearance operations after completion of the National Demining Plan.



Nicaraguan landmine survivors receive diplomas after completing OAS-sponsored vocational training. *Photo courtesy of PASCA Nicaragua*

The OAS and international donors plan to help Colombia expand its demining program from 246 deminers to 574 deminers by the end of 2010. This expansion will hopefully allow demining operations to clear communities in the 12 most seriously affected of Colombia's 32 administrative departments.

In 2010, the OAS will continue coordinated mine clearance along the Peru-Ecuador border. Originally planning to finish demining activities in 2009, both countries requested and received an eight-year deadline extension for their Ottawa Convention clearance date; these countries are now expecting demining operations to end in 2017. The majority of clearance efforts will be focused on the Cordillera del Condor region, which presents technical challenges to deminers working in the mountainous jungle area. Shorter projects are planned in eight minefields in the Rio Chira region of southern Ecuador. Due to the technical nature of the fields, specialized mechanical equipment, as opposed to manual operations, will be used to clear the fields.¹⁵

Challenges

Lack of funding threatens to hinder OAS activities in mine action. From 2002 through 2008, donors gave roughly \$6.1 million per year to the OAS Mine Action Program. Financial contributions declined to less than \$4.3 million in 2009. The OAS expects to complete the Nicaragua program within the next year, but also needs to continue work in Ecuador and Peru as the countries aim to meet their Ottawa Convention obligations by 2017. In the meantime, Colombia requires support from the OAS to expand its efforts, as insurgent groups continue to use mines, causing high casualty rates.¹⁵

Conclusion

The OAS has coordinated funding for important mine-action activities in nations throughout the Western Hemisphere. Not only has the OAS offered financial support for these nations, but it has partnered with governments and other

international organizations to coordinate national demining plans, training programs and assistance for landmine victims. While mine-affected nations in Latin America do not depend solely on OAS involvement for support, continued funding from international donors will enable the OAS to keep contributing to the nations' progress. Hopefully, the efforts of the OAS in addition to those of individual donors will allow more nations to join Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Suriname in becoming "mine free" states. ↗

Biography



Megan Sarian joined the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery in January 2009 as an Editorial Assistant. She plans to graduate in May 2010 from James Madison University with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in creative writing.

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