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International Support to Mine Action in Colombia: Mitigating Impact and Protecting Rights

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Environmental Harm

The clearance methods are likely to be in-
vast and harmful to the environment. The feas-
ibility study revealed a number of poten-
tial caveats. These include embankment, 
milling and bulk excavation. Some of these 
methods may endanger what have become ex-
cellent bird sanctuaries for penguins, as the 
groundhearing pressure of these birds is too 
small to set off anti-personnel mines. The fea-
sibility study identifies a number of recom-
mendations that will then be used to solve the 
environmental damage caused by the de-
mining process, which will, of course, contrib-
ute to the cost.

Total Contributions

There is also a risk that the British govern-
ment will treat this clearance as a contribu-
tion to its global mine-clearance effort. If this 
is allowed, then there may be a commensurate 
reduction in contributions in the long run. It 
does make a difference. A parliamentary ques-
tion to the British government asking for 
confirmation that the demining of the Falkland-
Malvinas Islands will be treated as 
additional money would be a useful way of 
resolving this problem.

Past Deminer Casualties

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the 
main reason the British Army stopped clear-
ning in the Falklands was the number of demin-
er casualties that occurred during the process. 
The feasibility study again is useful in spelling 
out a number of risk-management strategies 
that could be employed. The work the interna-
tional community has done in the development 
of the International Mine Action Standards 
should also be recognized as potentially being 
instrumental in helping reduce deminer casu-
alties. However, a reduced risk in casualties is 
still higher than the zero risk in deminer casu-
alties that is currently achieved by leaving these 
minesfields alone. In attempting to clear them, 
one should conduct a risk/benefit analysis, 
and given that the benefit is negligible according 
to the feasibility study, it is hard to see how even 
a marginal increase in deminer risk justified.

Of course, the risk to the individual deminer can be 
compartmentalized on an economic basis through 
the provision of incentives (i.e., salary), but this is 
useless given the cost/benefit analysis which, 
although currently incomplete, suggests that 
clearance of the Falkland-Malvinas Islands sim-
ply is not worth it.

Intent of Ottawa Convention

One possible objection to this approach to-
ward the Falkland-Malvinas Islands is that it 
would be a fundamental blow to the integrity 
of the Ottawa Convention, which was drafted 
specifically to prevent loopholes and other spe-
cial pleading weakening its effectiveness. 
This observation is valid; however, I would take 
a wider view. The whole point of the campaign 
is to reduce the humanitarian suffering caused 
by AP mines in the sense that these weapons are 
indiscriminate and excessively injurious. 
Given circumstances of scarce resources, a 
condition shared by humanitarian mine-ac-
tion programs, it seems that to enforce part of 
the Convention in circumstances where there 
are no humanitarian impact is missing the orig-
inal purpose of the ban.

A Possible Way Ahead

This perspective may seem very negative in 
terms of the current formulation of the Ottawa 
Convention and in particular toward Article 
5. However, I believe that the Ottawa Process 
has been so successful in the stigmatization 
of this approach that it is robust enough to 
sustain some amendments. One can see a 
prime example of this in Germany where 
surrounded several significant amendments in the 
U.S.-German convention. Lessons can also be taken 
from the carbon-trading concept understood 
in the Kyoto Protocol. 2 Given that landmines 
are forms of environmental pollution, countries 
that have a non-impact landmine 
problem could be allowed to offset them with 
an equivalent donation towards Article 6 to 
a country that is actually suffering impact from 
its contamination. An idea like this one 
was already suggested in the context of the 
Falkland-Malvinas Islands, and perhaps it is 
time to see it come to fruition.

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International Support to Mine Action in Colombia: Mitigating Impact and Protecting Rights

Ending the decades-long violence in Colombia is the only way to eliminate all landmines from the country. Until that time, there is need to mitigate their impact, minimize the number of new victims and assure better assistance to survivors.

by Charles Downs  (Downs Consulting )

O naging internal armed conflict1 is the determining factor in the landmine problem in Colombia. It is not simply one 
estimated to be 700,000 people who will be a continuing source of risk for the population. As a result, people are confined, displaced and denied access to the necessities of daily life. The impact of mines never goes away for the victims, nor for their families and their communities.

Resolving the conflict is the only way to eliminate all mines from the national to remove that this is the only way to eliminate landmines to live without the trauma, loss of life, and social and economic blockages pre-
duced by landmines.

All Colombians have the right to live without the risk of finding a mine in their path. They have the right to cultivate their fertile lands, many of which have been abandoned due to fear. Until the conflict is re-
solved, however, the impact of mines must be reduced, better assistance 
must be provided to all survivors and the number of new victims must be minimized.

Colombia is one of the few countries in the Americas where anti-
personnel landmines are in active use.2 Landmine victims have been recorded in the country since 1996, but the number rose sharply begin-
ing in 2001. Reasons for the increase include the heightened use of 
landmines by guerrilla groups, improvement of reporting measure-
ment mechanisms and the increased movement of the population.3 
Beginning the problem affects people living in 51 of the 32 Colombian de-
partments4 and 60 percent of municipalities, with particular presence in 
urban communities.5

Colombia is among the countries with the greatest number of new victims. According to the 2007 Landmine Monitor Report, Colombia had 1,109 mine victims in 2006, which is greater than three victims per 
day. That same year, two-thirds of the victims were from the Army and 
police, which is the highest proportion anywhere in the world. The civilian 
victims, on the other hand, grew to 314, nearly one each day. For Colombia 
alone, these two factors have been enough to place Colombia among 
the three countries with the most new mine victims.6 Although 
there was a decrease in victims the following year, Colombia continued 
to have more new victims than any other country. In 2007, there were 
695 victims: 193 were killed and 702 who were injured.7 

The presence of landmines in different regions of the country 
changes according to the evolution of the armed conflict, as demon-
strated, by the number of landmine victims over the period 
1995–2006. In 2006, the highest number of landmine victims was in 
Antioquia, Meta, Bolivar and Caqueta. Antioquia had more victims than the other three combined. In 2007, the four departments with the highest num-
ber of casualties were Narino, Antioquia, Guaviare and Arauca. Narino 
had more than the other three combined, reflecting the intensification 
of armed conflict there.8

What Can Be Done?9

Considering the experiences of similarly contaminated countries, 
there are three lines of action that can be taken by victims of landmine 
damage and civil society with the support of international organiza-
tions, even during a period of armed conflict. These measures include:

1. Reduce risk

2. Provide comprehensive support to victims

3. Develop the capability to coordinate and manage a multifaceted response to the landmine problem

Reduce risk. People have a need and a right to know how to pro-
tect themselves from danger, and the public sector has an obligation 
to inform them. There are many mine-risk education programs that 
have been developed around the world through mass media, schools,

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News Brief

U.S. Donations to Lebanon Help with Immense Needs

The United States has contributed $1.5 million to Mines Advisory Group for landmine clearance in Lebanon. Twelve thou-
sand square kilometers (4,665 square miles) of land in Lebanon are affected by cluster bombs, which remain from the 2006 
conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Many of these bombs failed to detonate on impact and pose a continuing risk to the 
Lebanese population.

Recently, there has been a reduction in funding by donors for mine-clearance groups in Lebanon, which has and led to 
that clearance in the country could come to an end. BACTEC, a commercial demining team based in the U.K., was forced to 
leave Lebanon due to lack of funding. The team had cleared 90,000 square meters (22 acres) in 2007, according to DemChurchAid 
which can be done to clear the remaining landmines.

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churches and communities. While all Colombians need basic mine awareness, those in places where the problem is more intense need more complex information from trained channels.

Support to victims. The Colombian Constitution and laws—such as Law 1145 (2007), which organizes the National Disability System, and Law 418 (1997), which provides for support to victims of the conflict—incorporate the basic principles to protect, promote and guarantee these rights and responsibilities. Colombian laws provide a clearer framework for victims’ rights than do those of many other countries. Nonetheless, there is a need to ensure that these rights are applied without arbitrary limitations or bureaucratic delays, and that they include psychosocial support and reintegration into work.

According to a 2007 Handicap International analysis of the network of victim assistance services in three departments, the present system is a good beginning for emergency and continuing medical treatment and physical rehabilitation. However, HI identified several limitations: insufficient resources, limited geographic coverage, absence of economic support to families and members, and very minimal psychosocial and labor support.

Capacity building. There is a need for a central office with a global perspective on the problem to coordinate the development of a national strategy and program of action. To be effective as possible, the central office needs complete, reliable and verified information, and should be willing to share that information and coordinate action with the many actors of the public sector and civil-society actors. There is a need for a national mine-action strategy to be develop in consensus with the relevant actors. There is also a need for minimum standards for all assistance measures, as well as a monitoring and quality-control mechanism. In Colombia, this responsibility falls to the Programa Presidencial para la Accion Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal, which is currently working to develop the necessary capacity, institutional structure and coordination mechanism required to meet these challenges.

Since landmines are a national problem that affects specific territories far removed from urban centers, the practical efforts of the national strategy must be prioritized and coordinated at the regional and local levels. The Departmental Mines Committee is an appropriate mechanism for this task, as it includes stakeholders from the public sector and civil society.

Current Responses

There are many civil-society, public and private institutions that carry out MRE in Colombia. Their important efforts are nonetheless insufficient; furthermore, their efficacy is unknown, given the lack of mechanisms to measure and evaluate results. Greater attention to monitoring results is essential to ensuring improved impact.

There are also several public, private, and civil-society actors responding to the needs of mine victims, and they are assured that emergency medical response, physical rehabilitation, psychosocial assistance and labor reintegration are needs not just of mine victims, but of persons with disabilities in general. There are very interesting pilot programs underway, including accommodation for accompanying family members during treatment and rehabilitation, psychosocial support for reintegration, vocational training and micro-credit programs. Nonetheless, there is a need for a more comprehensive policy framework and programs to ensure the desired reach.

The armed forces in Colombia are the only personnel currently authorized to conduct mine clearance, and some have received training from the Organization of American States and countries such as Canada, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States. Experience of other countries has shown that it is useful to have several actors conduct demining because it attracts more funds and enables simultaneous responses to a wide range of problems. In many post-conflict situations, demining has provided an “employment option” for demobilized combatants, and include national and international non-governmental organizations, as well as specialized private firms, all of which work within a framework of national standards and quality control.

Several donors have provided financial or technical support to mine action in Colombia, including the European Community, the OAS, the United Nations Development Programme, UNICEF, Canada, Norway, Switzerland and the United States. It is important to maintain these countries’ interest in the topic, which will likely increase with a clear public policy and effective programs demonstrating good use of funds that achieve practical results.

Solving the Problem

Colombia’s internal armed conflict must be addressed and put to an end in order to solve its landmine problem. The landmine problem is widespread, affecting 31 out of the 32 departments throughout Colombia, particularly in rural areas. Efforts should be made to inform all Colombians about their rights regarding landmines. It is important to keep international donors aware of Colombia’s ongoing landmine problem so that they continue to provide aid.

As long as mines continue to be used, the response will always be insufficient, which is why the only guaranteed way to end the landmine problem in Colombia is to resolve the conflict. In the meantime, there is a need to continue to extend the reach and quality of programs, and to increase the effectiveness and impact of the responsible institutions. This will benefit all Colombians and create a stronger ability to respond in the future.

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News Brief

Landmine Soap Helps “Clean up” Contamination

In 2006, Patricia Del Callejón, a Colombian student, designed and created a natural, landmine-shaped soap known as Cleanup. The following year, Alison Rieh and Benjamin Packer, two students from Milano The New School for Management and Urban Policy, created the Social Entrepreneurship Network and brought this product to the market. Cleanup soap works in conjunction with its non-governmental organization partner, the Cambodian Landmine Museum and Relief Facility, to help eliminate landmines throughout 88 countries by donating a portion of the sale to landmine-related charities and organizations. Each bar of soap costs US$8.25, and two out of the eight dollars are donated to Cleanup’s demining partners in support of landmine removal, assistance for landmine survivors and the Cambodian Landmine Museum. This soap’s packaging contains further information about demining and areas that are affected by landmines and explosive remnants of war.

Charles Downs has worked in mine action since 1989, when he became the Chief of the Mine Action Unit of the United Nations Office for Project Services, a position he held until 2004. Recent consulting assignments include lead investigator for the Service Action Center project to promote use of landmine information by development organizations; responsible for review of current practices in Technical Survey and land release for General International Centre for Humanitarian Demining; advisor to United Nations Development Programme–Colombia in designing its mine-action strategy; and Professor of International Project Management at New York University’s Wagner School.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME–COLOMBIA

A box of landmine-shaped soap known as Cleanup. The following year, Alison Rieh and Benjamin Packer, two students from Milano The New School for Management and Urban Policy, created the Social Entrepreneurship Network and brought this product to the market. Cleanup soap works in conjunction with its non-governmental organization partner, the Cambodian Landmine Museum and Relief Facility, to help eliminate landmines throughout 88 countries by donating a portion of the sale to landmine-related charities and organizations. Each bar of soap costs US$8.25, and two out of the eight dollars are donated to Cleanup’s demining partners in support of landmine removal, assistance for landmine survivors and the Cambodian Landmine Museum. This soap’s packaging contains further information about demining and areas that are affected by landmines and explosive remnants of war.