

# 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 a need to mitigate their impact, minimize the number of new victims and assure better assistance to survivors.

by Charles Downs [ Downs Consulting ]

Ongoing internal armed conflict<sup>1</sup> is the determining factor in the landmine problem in Colombia. It is not simply one more element to take into consideration; it completely alters the panorama. Mines are a product of that conflict. As long as they are active instruments in the dispute between forces, with each mine having an interested owner, mines 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 territory, and it is the only way to enable all Colombians to live without the trauma, loss of life, and social and economic blockages produced 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 resolved, however, the impact of mines must be reduced, better assistance must be provided to all current 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.<sup>2</sup> Landmine victims have been recorded in Colombia since 1990, but the number rose sharply beginning in 2001. Reasons for the increase may include the heightened use of landmines by guerrilla groups, improvement of reporting measurement mechanisms and the increased movement of the population.<sup>2</sup> Today the problem affects people living in 31 of the 32 Colombian departments<sup>3</sup> and 60 percent of municipalities, with particular presence in rural communities.<sup>4</sup>

Colombia is among the countries with the greatest number of new victims. According to the 2007 *Landmine Monitor Report*, Colombia had 1,106 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 alone (314, nearly one each day) were enough to place Colombia among the three countries with the most new mine victims.<sup>5</sup> Though there was a decrease in victims the following year, Colombia continued to have more new victims than any other country. In 2007, there were 895 victims: 193 were killed and 702 who were injured.<sup>2</sup>

The presence of landmines in the different regions of the country changes according to the evolution of the armed conflict, as demonstrated by comparing the locations of civilian victims over the period 1990–2006 with those recorded in 2007. During this period, the four departments<sup>6</sup> with the greatest number of civilian victims were Antioquia,



A community in Nariño, a province in southern Colombia, took part in a meeting against mines in its territory. Nariño has mines in 35 of its 63 municipalities. PHOTO COURTESY OF BORJA PALADINI

Meta, Bolívar and Caquetá. Antioquia had more victims than the other three combined. In 2007, the four departments with the highest number of casualties were Nariño, Antioquia, Guaviare and Arauca. Nariño had more than the other three combined, reflecting the intensification of armed conflict there.<sup>2</sup>

## What Can Be Done?

Considering the experiences of similarly contaminated countries, there are three lines of action that can be taken by various levels of government and civil society with the support of international organizations, even during a period of armed conflict. These measures include:

1. Reduce risk
2. Provide comprehensive support to victims
3. Develop the capacity to coordinate and manage a multifaceted response to the landmine problem

**Reduce risk.** People have a need and a right to know how to protect 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,



churches and communities. While all Colombians need basic mine awareness, those in places where the problem is more intense need more complete information from trusted 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—include the basic principles to promote, protect 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 the 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 family 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 as 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 developed 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 Acción 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 aware 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



Illegal groups in Colombia are still using mines in the armed conflict. In this image, a man from the military forces is examining a mine that was discovered on a road in a rural area.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME–COLOMBIA

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 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 members 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 ex-combatants. The actors may include national and international nongovernmental 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.

**Ottawa Commitments**

The Ottawa Convention<sup>5</sup> includes commitments to eliminate mines from the national territory, to destroy stockpiles (completed by Colombia in 2004<sup>6</sup>) and to assist victims, among other requirements. At the end of 2007, 155 countries had signed the Convention, including Colombia in 2000. Colombia’s requirements included destroying all stockpiled mines by March 2005, clearing all minefields within 10 years and providing assistance centers for mine victims.<sup>7</sup>

Non-state actors in some countries with internal conflicts have responded to the efforts of Geneva Call, a humanitarian organization seeking commitments from NSAs to avoid the use of landmines. Currently, 35 NSAs have pledged not only to abstain from using landmines, but to help remove them from areas including Burundi, Kurdistan, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey and Western Sahara.<sup>8</sup>

**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 continues 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. ♦

*See Endnotes, Page 111*

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**News Brief**

**Landmine Soap Helps “Clean up” Contamination**

In 2006, Parsons The New School for Design graduate Hideaki Matsui designed and created a natural, landmine-shaped soap known as Cleanup. The following year, Alison Keehn 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 nongovernmental organization partner, the Cambodia 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, 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 Cambodia Landmine Museum. The soap’s packaging contains further information about demining and areas that are affected by landmines and explosive remnants of war.