Comprehensive Action Against Anti-personnel Mines: A Regional Initiative to Address Landmine Issues

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Organization of American States (OAS)

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Comprehensive Action Against
Anti-personnel Mines: A Regional Initiative to Address Landmine Issues

For more than 18 years, the Organization of American States has had a leading role in the struggle to deal with humanitarian-demining issues in South and Central America. Since the inception of the Acción Común contra las Minas Antipersonal programs, the OAS has been involved in many aspects of mine action, bringing new hope to the region.

The OAS and Humanitarian Demining

The OAS was founded in 1948 to bring the countries of the Western Hemisphere together to strengthen cooperation and advance common interests. It is the region’s premier forum for multilateral dialogue and collective action. Through the ongoing Summits of the Americas process, the region’s leaders have entrusted the OAS with a growing number of responsibilities to help advance the countries’ shared vision. Building on this foundation, the OAS works to promote good governance, strengthen democratic institutions, foster peaceful resolution of conflicts and to bring political stability, social inclusion and prosperity to the region through dialogue and collective action. A problem-solving example of OAS collective action is the Acción Común contra las Minas Antipersonal (AICMA) program.

AICMA

The AICMA program implements OAS General Assembly resolutions, passed by the 34 member states, to assist requesting member states with their national humanitarian mine-action programs. The one-size-fits-all approach of AICMA’s assistance is able to assist in the removal of hundreds of thousands of anti-personnel mines and related debris and restore safe, productive living conditions for mine-affected communities in 32 different parts of Central and South America.

Humanitarian Demining. Originally conceived as an assistance program for mine clearance in Central America, AICMA assisted humanitarian-demining programs in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Suriname, enabling their governments to declare their countries mine-safe.

Mine-risk education. AICMA designs its MRE campaigns to complement humanitarian-demining operations, and to enable affected communities to get involved in mine-awareness initiatives, helping the exchange of information about the location of mined areas and explosive devices in the vicinity. During 2008, 118 education campaigns covering 125 mine-affected communities were carried out in Ecuador, Nicaragua and Peru. Mine-risk education is one of the components of humanitarian mine action with its mine-clearance work. These components include mine-risk education for affected communities, assistance for landmine victims and their families with physical and psychological rehabilitation services, as well as socioeconomic reintegration, stockpile destruction support for the Ottawa Convention, and removal of explosive remnants of war.

Victim assistance. The AICMA has assisted over 1,200 landmine survivors with medical, psychological and rehabilitative interventions in various beneficiary countries since its establishment in 1997. By December 2008, 97 percent of all victims in Nicaragua had received medical assistance and psychological rehabilitation. During this past year, the AICMA program assisted in the rehabilitation of 394 survivors in Nicaragua, 401 in Honduras, 77 in Colombia, three in Ecuador and 11 in Peru.

Support for AP mine ban. AICMA promotes the interest expressed by OAS General Assembly Resolutions to make the Americas a mine-free zone, and actively supports member states that are signatories to the Ottawa Convention in meeting their obligations. AICMA actively cooperated with the government of Nicaragua and the European Union in hosting the Managua Workshop on Progress and Challenges in Achieving a Mine-Free Americas, held this past February 2009.

Stockpile destruction. AICMA has supported landmine-stockpile destruction in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Honduras, Peru and Nicaragua, providing both technical and financial support for these efforts. Since 2003, more than one million stockpiled AP mines have been destroyed in the Americas, due in part to financial contributions from Canada and Spain.

Missions destruction and explosive remnants of war. During 2007, in coordination with the OAS Mission for Assistance to the Peace Process in Colombia and the financial support of the governments of Canada and Italy, AICMA assisted in a project to destroy 23,000 small arms and light weapons surrendered to the Colombian government by para-military groups as part of that country’s peace process. With Canadian and U.S. assistance, the OAS has supported mine-clearance operations carried out by the government of Nicaragua in 2007 and renewed in 2008 to destroy some 1,047 tons, or about half of the excess and obsolete ammunition in Nicaragua. In cooperation with a project sponsored by the United Nations Regional Center for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, AICMA provided a technical advisor to assist in the monitoring of the destruction of 42,500 weapons and more than 31 tons of weapon parts and accessories carried out by the government of Peru in 2008.

Coordination with international entities. The AICMA program also cooperates with a number of nongovernmental organizations. Cooperation with international entities over the life of the program has improved the efficiency and effectiveness of mine action initiatives throughout the hemisphere by marshalling available resources from these organizations, particularly in the areas of MRE, victim assistance and mine destruction. A close partnership with the Golden West Humanitarian Foundation (GWHF) helps to fund and successfully destroys weapons and excess munitions in Colombia and Nicaragua.

Throughout the years, the success of the work done by the AICMA program has been possible to achieve due to the generous contributions of Australia, Brazil, Denmark, the European Union, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, South Korea, Sweden and the United Kingdom. These contributions have contributed in the past, as well as for 2009: Belgium, Canada, Italy, Norway, Spain and the United States.

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On the next few pages, the accompanying articles on victim assistance in Nicaragua, methodologies for mine-risk education in Colombia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, and a method to measure program effects in Central America provide an in-depth view of the wide scope of AICMA activities.

Expanding the Vision

As a natural extension of mine-action activities, AICMA initiated support to member states in their efforts to destroy excess or obsolete munitions stockpiles as well as small arms/light weapons. The presence of stockpiles of obsolete munitions, explosives and other remnants of war poses a hazard to surrounding communities. Current proposals for the destruction of obsolete munitions stockpiled in Guatemala and explosive remnants of war scattered in parts of Nicaragua seek to remove the risk from accidental explosions and to eliminate or diminish the dangers of collecting UXO to sell as scrap metal.

Vocational training and social reintegration are key components of the overall AICMA vision. This type of assistance is the supplemental complement to rehabilitation projects to fully prepare affected men, women, boys and girls to return to productive lives.

In collaboration with the National Technological Institute of Nicaragua, AICMA has supported vocational training for 421 landmine survivors. By means of vocational training provided by the National Learning Service, AICMA invites private enterprises to support its different victim-assistance projects.

Effectiveness of AICMA

The AICMA program has proven its effectiveness in carrying out the requests of the OAS member countries that have sought its benefits in clearance operations, stockpile destruction and munitions destruction. Likewise the integrated, multi-lateral nature of its experiences in completed national programs to assist other countries still facing difficult and complex mine problems.

In 2009, the program anticipates assisting the completion of mine clearance in Nicaragua and transitioning its victim-assistance structure into a local NGO run by landmine survivors to provide follow-up services to victims in the future. Sustaining mine-clearance efforts in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, as well as assistance to many landmine victims and affected communities that still struggle to recover from the effects of landmines, will pose a difficult challenge for several more years, however, with continued international support, these countries can also overcome formidable obstacles to joining the other nations of the Americas that have become mine-free.

Humanitarian Demining Operations

Since 1990, the Organization of American States’ national demining assistance programs have been working to educate citizens about landmines and eliminate existing minefields in Nicaragua. The OAS’ program Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal has successfully worked to coordinate with the Ministry of Education, local representatives, community leaders and volunteers to promote awareness about landmines, protect people from further injuries and provide rehabilitation for survivors.

by Johanna García García and Erika Estrada Chau [Organization of American States]

Following more than 16 years of effort on the part of the Nicaraguan government, the AP mine problem is now contained in the departments of Nueva Segovia and Jinotega. When clearance operations resumed in January 2009, 20 minefields remained to be cleared in accordance with the National Plan. Accomplishments

The achievements obtained to date in Nicaragua, with the support of the OAS program, reached more than 96 percent of projections in the national demining plan. The completion of humanitarian-dimining operations is projected for the end of 2009, providing there is continuous financial support from the international community. From January 2008–December 2008, several accomplishments were achieved. They are discussed in the text below.

Humanitarian Demining

The OAS program assists the government of Nicaragua in the execution and administration of its national demining plan by providing specialized equipment, administrative and logistic support, training for national personnel, technical advice and international monitoring. It also oversees the Information Management System for Mine Action database for Nicaragua. The collection and analysis of data by the national offices has taken on an increasingly important role in each of the programs regarding recording and tracking data on landmine victims; on suspicious, confirmed and cleared minefields; and on areas where mine-risk education campaigns are conducted.

From January–December 2008, with AICMA assistance, important accomplishments reduced the threat posed by the presence of anti-personnel landmines in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Army

T he origin of today’s Organization of American States’ humanitarian demining assistance program dates to Nicaragua’s request for assistance in 1990. Since the establishment of the program, several countries in the region have completed their respective national demining plans: Costa Rica in 2002, Honduras in 2004, and Guatemala and El Salvador in 2005. Earlier this decade, the program extended its assistance throughout the Americas as it supported South American countries in complying with certain requirements of the Ottawa Convention.

As 2009 begins, Nicaragua remains the last mine-affected country in Central America. The mine problem in Nicaragua stems from the internal armed conflict that took place during the 1980s, leaving 13 of the country’s 15 departments, and both of its autonomous regions, contaminated by landmines. Some 284 communities throughout the country were determined to be located within one kilometer (0.62 mile) of mined areas.

At the conclusion of the armed conflict, the Nicaraguan Army registered 115,851 mines throughout the territory. Since demining efforts began in 1990, additional minefields have been identified, and the most recent estimate of the number of landmines in Nicaragua is 178,751, distributed among 1,018 mined areas. Over the years, these mines have caused injury to more than 2,200 Nicaraguans and the death of hundreds.

The impact of anti-personnel mines in Nicaragua affected the security of the population and transcended into areas that limit the economic well-being of the population. The restriction of safety and movement within communities was the most serious consequence of AP mines. Access to communities, transportation, health, education, water and electric energy were also affected. Humanitarian demining efforts in Nicaragua have positively affected these aspects of daily life, which are relevant for the economic development of affected communities.

CARL E. CASE

Carl E. Case is Director of the Office of Humanitarian Mine Action for the Organization of American States. In addition to his 12 years of experience working on mine-action issues in the Americas with the OAS, he also served in Iraq in 2008 as the Senior Conventional Weapons Destruction Advisor with the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, U.S. Department of State.

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See Endnotes, Page 111

Humanitarian Demining Operations

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<th>CLEARANCE</th>
<th>QUALITY CONTROL</th>
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Table 1. Humanitarian demining operations January–December 2008

By means of vocational training provided by the National Learning Service, AICMA invites private enterprise to support its different victim-assistance projects.