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Recommended Citation
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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-dimming issues in South and Central America. Since the inception of the Acção Conjunta contra las Minas Antipersonal (AICMA) program, the OAS has been involved in many aspects of mine action, bringing new hope to the region.

The AICMA 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 coordinated 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.

At the core of the OAS mission is an unequivocal commitment to human rights and gender equality and to the advancement of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Building on this foundation, the OAS works to promote good governance, strengthen human rights, foster peace and security, expand trade and address the complex problems caused by poverty, drugs and crime. In the fields of health, education and the environment, OAS member states have contributed to the clearing of landmines and the destruction or neutralization of explosive remnants of war. The OAS is dedicated to the clearance of minefields under government jurisdiction. The OAS works to support landmine survivors and with humanitarian-dimming initiatives to improve citizens’ freedom to live, work and travel without fear of injury or death due to landmines or explosive remnants of war.

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 OAS states that with international human rights treaties, as well as the adoption and implementation of international instruments, the OAS states has made significant progress in the field of landmine clearance.

The AICMA program has assisted in clearing minefields in Central America, South America, the Caribbean and the Andean region.

The AICMA program is the focal point within the OAS for mine action, integrating the component of humanitarian demining 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.

Defense Board, an OAS entity, coordinates monitoring personnel selected by member states in support of the program to ensure safety and adherence to national and international mine-action standards.

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 396 survivors in Nicaragua, 40 in Honduras, 77 in Colombia, three in Ecuador and 11 in Peru.

Support for AP mine ban. AICMA promotes the interest expressed in OAS General Assembly Resolutions to make the Americas a landmine-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-destroying projects in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Peru and Nicaragua, providing both technical and financial support for these efforts. Since 2001, more than one million stockpiled AP mines have been destroyed in the Americas, due in part to financial contributions from Canada and the United States.

Munitions 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 30,000 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. contributions, AICMA has assisted in the destruction of 10,547 tons, or about half of the excess and obsolete ammunition in Nicaraguan Army stockpiles. In conjunction 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 monitoring the destruction of 42,596 weapons and more than 30 types of weapon parts and accessories carried out by the government of Peru in 2008.

Coordination with international entities. The AICMA program has supported the activities of other international and 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-removal destruction. A close partnership with the Golden West Humanitarian Foundation (GWHF) resulted in the fruitful and successful destruction of weapons and excess munitions in Colombia and Nicaragua.

Throughout the year, 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, Iceland, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation, South Korea, Sweden and the United Kingdom. These contributions have contributed to the past, as well as for 2009: Belgium, Canada, Italy, Norway, Spain and the United States.

Fulfilling the Vision

Currently, the Nicaraguan National Demining Plan is nearing completion. The number of people at risk in communities within five kilometers (3.1 miles) of a stockpiled field, once estimated at 550,000, has been reduced to 11,135 inhabitants in 90 MRE-educated communities. According to a Nicaraguan survey by the national census bureau, cleared areas have facilitated improvements in freedom of movement, access to transportation, reestablishment and expansion of medical care, and better access to education.

On the Peru–Ecuador border, along the Condor mountain range, joint humanitarian-dimming operations continue in seven different zones of the Ecuadorian province of Morona-Santiago and the vicinity of Chiquitos in the Peruvian department of Amazonas. Progress on the border areas will facilitate implementation of the bilateral plan to integrate economic activities between the two countries and develop agriculture, livestock production and tourism. AICMA is also coordinating plans to develop an innovative mechanical solution for the clearance of anti-personnel mines in the southern border zone of the Chira River.

Launching the AICMA program to assist Colombia’s humanitarian-demining efforts in 2005 was the manifestation of a dynamic vision. This program was conceived with responding to humanitarian emergencies caused by AP mines laid by armed non-state actors during the ongoing conflict between the government and NIOs. It aimed to reduce or eliminate human suffering in a country where mines pose a threat in 31 of its 32 departments.

In Colombia, a positive social impact can already be seen as the areas cleared in the Guaviare department have created safer conditions for indigenous communities. Similarly, clearance of mines and unexploded ordnance from the municipalities of San Francisco and Bajo Grande in the Antioquia and Bolivar departments, respectively, has allowed displaced families to return to their abandoned homes and cultivate their lands. For 2010, Colombia increased its humanitarian demining capacity from four to six units. Three of these 40-member units are dedicated to the clearance of minefields under government jurisdiction. The other three respond to humanitarian emergencies caused by mines placed by illegal armed groups.

By Carl E. Case [Organization of American States]
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 efforts 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 encroaching obsolescent 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 destruction of obsolete munitions stockpiled in Guatemala and explosives remnant of warfare scattered in parts of Nicaragua seek to remove the risk from accidental explosions and to eliminate or diminish the dangerous practice 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 a sequential supplement 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 the middle of 2008, 11 vice-ministers of education in South American countries had initiated support to member states for the purposes of training for people affected by landmines and transitioning its victim-assistance structure to a local NGO run by landmine survivors to provide follow-up services to victims in the future. Sustaining mine-cleared areas is a key issue 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. Over the years, these mines have caused injury to more than 1,200 Nicaraguans and the death of hundreds. The impact of anti-personnel mines in Nicaragua affected the security of the population and transmuted 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.

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 mine destruction. Likewise, the integrated, multi-lateral nature of its experiences in completed national programs to assist other countries still facing difficult 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-cleared areas is a key issue 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. From 1995 to 2008, 2,021 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 1995, 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 2,100 Nicaraguans and the death of hundreds.

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Prospects for the Future

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