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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 Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal programs, the OAS has been involved in many aspects of mine action, bringing new hope to the region.

by Carl E. Caza (Organization of American States)

The task of removing hundreds of thousands of anti-personnel mines and restoring the livelihoods of thousands of victims from conflict-ravaged regions of Central America and South America seemed impossible in 1991. Since then, the program known as Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal of the Organization of American States has evolved within an eminently humanitarian vision of reestablishing safe, secure and productive living conditions for mine-affected communities, with concomitant consideration for developmental, human rights and gender issues. AICMA is the focal point within the OAS for mine action, integrating 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.

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 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 unwavering commitment to democracy, as expressed in 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.

Similarly, the OAS needs to engage in conflict 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 its 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 common expressed strategies of AICMA’s ability to assist in the removal of hundreds of thousands of anti-personnel mines, and to reestablish safe, secure and productive living conditions for thousands of mine-affected communities in 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. Likewise, AICMA currently supports mine-clearance efforts in Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Peru.

Mine-risk education. AICMA designs its MRE campaigns to supplement humanitarian-demining operations, and to enable affected communities to get involved in mine-awareness initiatives, facilitating the exchange of information about the location of mined areas and explosive devices in the vicinity. During 2008, 186 education campaigns covering 125 mine-affected communities were carried out in Ecuador, Nicaragua and Peru. In August 2008, Colombia saw AICMA launch its first series of mine-risk education campaigns to supplement clearances initiatives in response to humanitarian emergencies caused by landmines. Three prevention campaigns focusing on three communities at risk reached more than 5,800 people.

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 per cent 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-stockpile destruction efforts in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, 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 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 a project to destroy 30,000 small arms and light weapons surrendered to the Colombian government by paramilitary groups as part of that country’s peace process. With Canadian and U.S. contributions and under the leadership of AICMA, the AICMA was able to support the demining efforts in 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 monitoring the destruction of 42,521 more 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 strengthens relationships with 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 detection. A close partnership with the Golden West Humanitarian Foundation has resulted in the safe and secure destruction of 3,800 landmines and unexploded ordnance in several municipalities of Nicaragua getting ready for development from January to June 2008. Likewise, AICMA currently supports mine-clearance efforts in Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Peru.

In 2008, 4,500 beneficiaries in Colombia were covered under the program’s medical assistance. In the southern border zone of the Chira River, the AICMA program has assisted the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in implementing a medical assistance program for victims of violence in the department of Cauca. AICMA has supported landmine-clearance efforts in 12 communities in the department of Cauca.

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Fulfilling the Vision

Currently, the Nicaragua National Demining Plan is nearing completion. The number of people at risk in communities within five kilometers (3.1 miles) of a cleared field, once estimated at 558,000, has been reduced to 11,133 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, resettlement and expansion of medical care, and better access to education.

On the Peru-Ecuador border, along the Condor mountain range, joint humanitarian-demining operations continue in seven different zones of the Ecuadorian province of Morona-Santiago and the vicinity of Chiquinquirá in the Peruvian department of Amazonas. Progress on the border areas will facilitate implementation of the bi-national 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 effort in 2005 was the manifestation of a dynamic vision. This program was concerned with responding to humanitarian emergencies caused by AP mines laid by armed groups during the ongoing conflict in the Colombian province. It aimed to reduce or eliminate human suffering in a country where mines pose a threat in 31 of its departments.

In Colombia, a positive social impact can already be seen as the areas cleared in the Guaviare department have created safer living conditions for indigenous communities. Similarly, clearance of mines and unexploded ordnance from the municipalities of San Francisco and Río Grande in the Antioquia and Bolívar departments, respectively, has allowed displaced families to return to their abandoned homes and cultivate their lands. For 2016, 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 authority. The other three respond to humanitarian emergencies caused by mines placed by illegal armed groups.
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 economic benefits 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 contact with national agencies in Ecuador and Peru to identify and locate landmine accident survivors who have been assisted in Ecuador and Peru; and to support vocational training for 421 landmine survivors. By the middle of 2008, 11 victim-assistance projects had been approved and 18 per cent of the overall program had been fully prepared. Additional victim-assistance projects are in the planning stages.

Effectiveness of AICMA

The AICMA program has proven its effectiveness in carrying out the requests of the OAS member countries that have sought its assistance. The program has been requested to provide vocational training for landmine survivors in coordination with the Colombian Integral Rehabilitation Center. In March 2007, AICMA initiated a project to enable the social reintegration of survivors by means of vocational training provided by the National Learning Service. AICMA invites private enterprises to support its different victim-assistance projects.

2008: A Year of Advances and Accomplishments

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’s goal is to contribute to the establishment, implementation, and sustainability of national and local mine-risk reduction programs, to strengthen national capacities, and to provide humanitar-ian demining assistance.

The 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 Suriname 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 thousands of individuals disarmed of their landmines and other remnants of war scattered in parts of Nicaragua. Recent experiences have revealed the difficulties of collecting UXO to sell as scrap metal.

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 safe.

Table 1: Humanitarian demining operations, January–December 2008

| HOURS WORKED | 4,557.66 | 216.00 | 4,774.26 |
| SQUARE METERS CLEARED | 206,507.00 | 35,839.00 | 242,346.00 |
| OBJECTIVES WORKED | 49 | | |

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-démining 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 Operations

The AICMA program promotes the need to conduct MI chips in Latin America. The program promotes the need to conduct MI chips in Latin America.