ICRC Weapons-contamination Activities in Colombia

Andy Wheatley

ICRC

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Recommended Citation
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Colombia, it is instead seen as a criminal outfit geared toward drugs, kidnapping and terrorism, with no ideological backing. Political consensus among Colombians for a solution to the terrorist issue continues to intensify, putting to a mandate for a final resolution of the insurgency situation and a more lasting peace throughout Colombia.

Colombia’s Future

In this context, the IIHR and the Programa Presidencial de Acción Integral contra las Minas Antipersonal, or PPAICMA (Presidential Program for Mine Action), have developed a detailed program to move mine assistance into the most heavily affected regions of Colombia. By 2011, Colombian HMA planners intend to train and equip 12 mobile ERTs in fixed locations within the 12 most-affected departments of Colombia; they also plan to have two teams on standby. Currently, six humanitarian clearance teams exist—two each are sponsored by Canada, Colombia, and the U.S. The two Canadian teams are relegated to the fixed, static clearance of 54 military bases. By the end of 2011, these two fixed-site teams will have completed military site cleanup and will be positioned to team with the other ERTs to focus on the more urgent humanitarian need for clearance at remote civilian sites.

Demining Challenges

The four U.S.- and Canadian-supported ERTs have encountered significant difficulties in achieving their desired goal of rapidly reintegrating former IDPs. ERT deployment prioritization has been difficult due to conflicting pressure points, including highly visible and volatile media events, a strong military proclivity to develop sites close to secure basins with limited humanitarian access, a lack of strong community support, changing economic and IDP patterns, and a lack of full and open commitment to developing accountable schedules for ERT deployment.

There are several factors that need to be addressed to make operational clearance in Colombia successful. These include:

- Lack of technological readiness
- Lack of coordinated integration with the affected communities’ five-year planning process
- Labeling of IDPs as agents of the government, which they choose to cooperate with and associate with Colombian authorities
- Conflict among Colombian and international authorities about the extent of required clearance

At present, Colombian planners have not determined a satisfactory intermediary course between full-scale cleanup and community integration and timely deployment to the many communities requiring assistance. The two U.S.-sponsored projects in Bajo Grande, Bolívar and San Juan, Antioquia, required more than twice the initially planned turn-around time of four months to complete community clearance and turnover.

Authorities are under strong external constraints to continue to operate under a mandate for a completely mine-free pattern, largely avoiding the complexities and worries associated with employing international standards for sampling and area reduction. With a potential budget shortfall for planned ERT projects, it is becoming increasingly clear that something must give, and additional donors are needed or many communities will be left in the dark.

In addition to funding shortfalls, incomplete community infrastructure and econom- ical turmoil prevent a fully successful turnover of these projects to townspeople, who were forced to seek a semi-permanent existence seven or eight years ago by FARC forces. In Bajo Grande, lack of a definable water source, fully accessible roads, available health and school facilities as well as a redeployed economic agricultural pattern are all obstacles for successful community reintegration that were addressed by PPAICMA and Bajo Grande community leaders.

In San Francisco, Antioquia, the integra- tion has been smoother, largely because the surrounding area was not abandoned as it was in Bajo Grande. Until recently, security issues have deterred the townspeople from returning to San Francisco. This issue was resolved recently, allowing full economic and social inte- gration to occur.

Additionally, economic conditions and ex- pectations have changed over the last eight years since the internally displaced people have returned. One example is the expectation of returning IDPs to continue to farm tobacco, which was previously a successful cash crop. Upon returning, they found that the market has largely disappeared. Thus, it is paramount analysis of the official casuistry figures that shows in 2006 and 2007 more than 60 percent (340) of known civilian mine casualties and 30 percent (190) of military casualties took place in just 60 of the 1,139 mu- nicipal areas in Colombia, usually rural and remote areas. However, the problem of weapons contamination is extremely dynamic, and the focus of the program has changed and continues to change substantially in recent years. Areas highly affected three to four years ago may no longer be similarly affected today.

There are relatively few international and national organizations undertaking weapons-contamination activities in Colombia, and no inter- national humanitarian mine-clearance agencies. Although donor interest has grown in recent years, implementation capacity remains rel- atively limited. Additionally, while the capacity of the Colombian government has improved substantially, capacity to coordinate activities continues to be limited.

Future

James Madison University’s Mine Action Information Center and PUSA presents a briefing during planning conference in June 2009 in Bogota, Colombia, to address a number of is- sues with the Colombian players, including civil- ians, PPAICMA, Ministry of Defense, OAS, the Colombian military and other demining representatives. Participants developed a 15-point Plan of Action on how to best integrate key stakeholders, components and best practices into Colombia’s demining efforts. The spotlight will again be on Colombia when the Second Biennial Conference of the 1997 Ottawa Convention takes place in Cartagena.

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ICRC Weapons-contamination Activities in Colombia

The International Committee of the Red Cross has been working alongside the Colombian Red Cross to ease Colombia’s weapons-contamination problem, more difficult by ongoing conflict. By combining preventive measures, victim assistance, rehabilitation programs and economic aid, the ICRC has strengthened Colombian organizations, while educating the public and assisting those negatively affected by explosive remnants of war.

The efforts of the ICRC have significantly helped Colombia where many other international organizations had found it difficult to assist because of the current political situation.

by Andy Wheatley | International Committee of the Red Cross

When describing the problem and its response, the ICRC refers to weapons-contamination activities rather than mine action. Institutionally, it finds this terminology more accu- rately reflects the true nature of the problem in which explosive remnants of war are often as problematic and prevalent as landmines.

The nature of ICRC fieldwork is to provide protection and assistance to the civilian population affected by the internal armed conflict in Colombia. The ICRC seeks to reduce the impact of weapons contamination where the organization has a comparative advantage in terms of access or capability in a given situation. Due to the severe impact of weapons contamination in Colombia, the ICRC substantially expanded its focus on weapons-contamination issues in 2007. It seeks to provide a multidisciplinary response to the needs of affected communities and victims in terms of data gathering, victim assistance, and preventive activities. The focus of the ICRC’s work is a mixture of direct-action inter- vention, support to the Colombian Red Cross weapons-contamination activities and lobbying of government institutions.

This article will summarize key aspects of the weapons-contamination situa- tion in Colombia, and outline the ICRC and CRC movement response.

The Weapons-contamination Context

Colombia is substantially affected by the ongoing use of improvised explosive devices, primarily activated by parties to the conflict. In such a context, effective and widespread humanitarian mine clear- ance is difficult, if not impossible, while the problem in widespread. The workshops analysis of the formal casuistry figures shows that in 2006 and 2007 more than 60 percent (340) of known civilian mine casualties and 30 percent (190) of military casualties took place in just 60 of the 1,139 munici- pal areas in Colombia, usually rural and remote areas. However, the problem of weapons contamination is extremely dynamic, and the focus of the program has changed and continues to change substantially in recent years. Areas highly affected three to four years ago may no longer be similarly affected today.

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Edmund Trimakas has worked for the last ten years as a Project Manager in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs’ Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement. From 2002 to 2004, he was a Case Officer in the U.S. Department of State. Before this position, he was the Manager of Foreign military sales and a Program Analyst at Armstrong Laboratory, Wright Patterson Air Force Base for 13 years, where he has an MBA in finance and health administration and a B.S. in chemical engineering with a minor in political science from the University of Virginia with his wife and two children.

Edmund Trimakas

Program Manager
Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement
Bureau of Political-Military Affairs
U.S. Department of State
711 15th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20523
Tel: +1 202 663 0014
Fax: +1 202 663 5060
E-mail: trimakas@state.gov
Web site: http://www.state.gov/
Risk education and VA information. The ICRC also provides information on weapons- contamination risks and role of the district and government agencies should play. Between October and September 2008, ICRC undertook training sessions in approximately 30 weapons-contaminated municipalities.

In Colombia, the Colombian Red Cross is a major provider of risk education. In 2007, the ICRC provided assistance to over 400 health staff, from 78 health posts and 57 hospitals, while organizing, in the first nine months of 2008, 12 courses for 330 participants coming from 96 health structures. The ICRC also pays transportation costs and living expenses for conflict victims and one family member during medical and rehabilitation care. In 2007, the ICRC economically assisted 235 victims of mines or ERW, and in 2008 this figure increased to 330. The ICRC maintains an emergency fund to ensure that those who fall outside the government regularity framework for assistance receive emergency treatment. The ICRC has assisted 40 percent of all civilian victims injured between 2002 and the end of 2008.

The ICRC is the largest provider of rehabilitation assistance in Colombia. Most victims receive access to some form of emergency health care, a much smaller percentage receives access to physical rehabilitation services. With a view toward maximizing both access and sustainability, the ICRC has launched a number of interventions to support the creation of rehabilitation centers throughout the country.

Victim-assistance Activities

Under Colombian law, victims of mines or ERW vic-
tims have the right to assistance. A mismatch often exists between victims’ rights to services and the ability of the CRC to provide them. The ICRC has developed a capacity to undertake emergency risk education in areas where this is not possible, or where the CRC capacity does not exist. In such cases, the strategy is for the ICRC to undertake activities in the short term, while over time seeking to build trust and obtain access for the CRC activities in the long term (if necessary).

Prevention Activities

Risk reduction. The ICRC also undertakes risk-reduction activities for weapons-affected communities. These involve the provision of specific alternatives to weapons-contaminated communities based on a clear understanding of how weapons contamination affects them. This is usually in the form of rehabilitation, water or economic-security activities, or mobilization and preparedness activities designed to facilitate access and aimed at limiting the direct humanitarian impact of mining on the civilian popula-
tion living in mined areas, or other interventions to mitigate the impact of weapons contamination on them.

For example, in one village, the ICRC was asked to provide an alternative water source, since the existing system was damaged and the community did not dare go to the spring due to the presence of mines. While the water team could provide an alternative water source, the situation was resolved by the ICRC approaching the armed group present in that area, discussing the specific humanitarian impact of mines on that community, and highlighting its responsibility to facilitate access. The armed group removed the mines, and the community was informed they were free to access the area and repair the water source. Due to lack of access to the rural areas of the most mine-affected municipalities, no other organization has the capacity to undertake such activities or raise this issue with the group involved. In this example, a protection strategy, highlighting the humanitarian consequences of mine use, was a potentially serious problem. The ICRC, however, does not have this level of access and contact with armed groups in all locations of the country.

As part of a risk-reduction program, the ICRC built this community sanitation block to avoid the need for children to use mostly unsafe and contaminated water.