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Nicole Vera

Organization of American States

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AIMCA—OAS: Enhancing Aid to Landmine Survivors

Since 1997, the Organization of American States' Comprehensive Action against Anti-personnel Mines, or *Acción Integral contra Minas Antipersonal* (AICMA), has been increasing aid to landmine survivors and their families. Through vocational training, physical and psychological rehabilitation, job placement, social reintegration and emergency treatment, AICMA—OAS has provided hundreds of landmine survivors with the help they need to once again become active members in their communities.

by J. Nicole Vera [Organization of American States]

The Organization of American States' program for mine action, *Acción Integral contra Minas Antipersonal*, enables requesting member states to support the victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance and their families. AICMA's goal is to support survivors' recovery from both the physical and psychological traumas of their injuries and their reintegration as productive and contributing members of their communities.

Landmines in the Americas: Nicaragua and Colombia

The armed conflict experienced in the 1980s¹ left Nicaragua contaminated with mines, many of which are located near populated areas or along the border with Honduras. Most accidents occur in isolated areas where medical treatment is unavailable, and many survivors cannot afford appropriate care. There are 1,079 landmine survivors in Nicaragua, many of whom are male heads of family aged 20 to 40 years.²

Due to the internal conflict originating over 40 years ago, Colombia is the country in South America most affected by landmine accidents. Illegally armed groups continue to use anti-personnel mines, which have been found on public roads, around the perimeters of their military camps, near water sources and even around schools.³ The continued use of these weapons has left 31 out of Colombia's 32 departments⁴ mine-affected, resulting in an average of three landmine casualties per day.⁵ Of these victims, 35 percent are civilians; one-third of these are children. The numbers are staggering, especially when considering there were 6,674 landmine survivors between 1990 and January 2008.²

Victim Assistance in Nicaragua and Colombia

In 1997, AICMA in Nicaragua initiated a victim-assistance component at the behest of the Nicaraguan government. Aimed at providing physical and psychological rehabilitation, as well as vocational training and social reintegration, the victim-assistance program focuses on identifying landmine survivors and providing them with transportation from their communities to rehabilitation centers and lodging, meals, prostheses, therapy and medications. AICMA collaborates with the *Centro Nacional de Prótesis and Ortesis*, as well as with the Nicaraguan National Technological Institute, the *Instituto Nacional de Tecnología*, which provides training.

The accomplishments and lessons learned from the victim-assistance program in Nicaragua have shaped victim assistance in Colombia. The strategy is similar: Ensure the victim's emergency treatment, physical and psychological rehabilitation, vocational training, and finally job placement and social reintegration. Vocational training is coordinated with the *Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje*, the National Training Service. The final phase includes awarding victims micro-enterprise seed grants for small businesses.



Emilio José Gómez Florian, born in the town of Mozonte, Nicaragua, lost his leg to a landmine while planting corn on his farm.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

AICMA regional offices maintain databases on the progress of each victim as well as facilitates enrollment in training courses and applications for grants and scholarships. The first step in the vocational training and micro-enterprise grant process is the diagnostic phase during which victims' skills and interests are matched with the appropriate training course. The creativity involved in this preliminary process, for both the victims and AICMA, is crucial to ensuring success. Training courses are offered over a six- to nine-month period, both in Nicaragua and Colombia, in trades such as auto mechanics, computer skills, carpentry, shoe making, tailoring and cosmetology. Both victim-assistance programs provide accounting and financial advice as well as follow-up rehabilitation support. AICMA permanently monitors the training process, as well as the execution of micro-enterprises, for which consultative visits by INATEC are made.

The process of aiding each victim requires special consideration, creativity and flexibility—factors outside the individual's control, such as funding, national geography, national economy, as well as



Emilio José Gómez Florian received a micro-enterprise grant through the OAS to open a pottery studio.

variables within the person such as his or her type of injury, previous training, number of dependants and familial support, make each victim's case unique.

Emilio José Gómez Florian, a landmine survivor in Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua, has benefited from the victim-assistance program. In November 2005 he received a US\$1,158 grant to open a pottery studio, for which he had received training. The grant helped him afford such supplies as a pottery wheel, kiln, clay and tables. Gómez is in charge of designing and crafting the pottery, while his brother paints and helps run the business. The money generated from Gómez's business has allowed him to send his two children to school. Gómez employs seven members of his community to distribute his pottery, which has made a positive impact on the productivity of Mozonte, the town in which he lives.

Since 1997, AICMA has provided physical and psychological rehabilitation to 884 Nicaraguan landmine survivors and vocational training to 200.⁶ In Colombia, AICMA has financially supported 27 landmine survivors with transportation, meals, and physical and psychological rehabilitative services through the *Centro Integral de Rehabilitación de Colombia* since 2006. Both the Nicaraguan and Colombian governments have supported the AICMA victim-assistance efforts.

Currently in Colombia, three landmine survivors are in the admission process to the vocational training program, 12

survivors are in vocational training and 15 have recently graduated. The recent graduates are supported with job placements or micro-enterprise grants.

Challenges and Responses

Some individual cases require more flexibility and creativity than others. In the case of Javier Gutiérrez Salazar, for instance, providing aid has been difficult due to the severity of his injuries. On 24 February 2006, in San Juan de Arama, Colombia, Gutiérrez was grazing his livestock when one of his cows stepped on an anti-personnel landmine. The intensity of the explosion caused Gutiérrez to lose his genitals along with two vocal chords. The devastating effects of the accident have changed his life forever. Although Gutiérrez received immediate emergency care and went on to participate in vocational training courses through SENA, the costs of reconstructive surgery exceeded the program's capabilities.

Gutiérrez's case has particularly been an exercise in creativity and patience. He has returned to self-sufficiency and currently works for a hotel in Bogotá—employment he obtained through AICMA. Gutiérrez has endeared himself to the AICMA team members, who have relentlessly sought out options for aiding him. On June 4, 2008 the *Hospital San Rafael de Bogotá*, with the support of the Colombian government, successfully performed reconstructive surgery of Gutiérrez's reproductive organs.

AICMA's challenges and accomplishments help improve aid to victims and keep the program flexible. The reality of situations like Gutiérrez's serves as an impetus for creative problem-solving on how to enhance aid to landmine survivors and their families, because it is not only saving lives that matters, but also improving the quality of people's lives. Through this program, support has been given to people who would not otherwise receive rehabilitation and reintegration services and be able to contribute to the productivity of their communities.

Donors of the program include the governments of Canada, Italy, Spain and the United States. Their support has continued to make an important difference. ♦

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J. Nicole Vera is a consultant for the OAS's Office of Humanitarian Mine Action. She recently graduated from Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia, with a Bachelor of Arts in English.

J. Nicole Vera
Organization of American States
Office of Humanitarian Mine Action
1889 F St. NW
Washington, DC 20006 / USA
Tel: +1 202 458 3769
E-mail: nvera@oas.org
Web site: <http://aicma.oas.org>