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Empowering the People Through Mine Awareness in Latin America

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EMPOWERING

the People Through Mine Awareness in Latin America

by Juan Carlos Ruan,
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Introduction

At the Battle of Williamsburg in 1862, the decision was made to adapt the first shell in order to surprise the enemy. No one would have predicted that an unending battle of man against his own creation was in the works. Perhaps, if the strong negative feelings raised by mine use at the beginning would have deemed this weapon improper and banished its use, countries around the world would not have perfected the art of producing and employing landmines. We have watched landmines evolve from clumsy, easily re-deployed weapons to present day AP mines that continue to claim the lives of millions. Today, we struggle with the reality that our creation has become our strongest enemy.

When it comes to the landmine issue, we are all familiar with countries such as Rwanda and Afghanistan. We have witnessed the efforts made by celebrities such as Princess Diana and Queen Noor of Jor-

dan, as they took us through these countries and met with landmine victims. While Latin America's landmine situation may not be as publicized as that of Rwanda or Afghanistan, the same consequences still exist: civilians are victimized, development is stunted and, in some cases, the peace process is jeopardized.

Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Peru and Ecuador have all been damaged by the use of mines in past conflicts. Mine awareness is the most important factor to protect the populations, to conduct humanitarian demining and bring lasting peace and security to the region.

Nicaragua

During the 1980s, Nicaragua served as an arena for armed conflict between the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), who seized power from the Somoza government in 1979, and a Contra resistance with bases in Honduras and Costa Rica. An estimated

135,000 mines were laid by both parties, with most of them located on the northern and southern borders of the country. Tragically, while the mines buried to protect strategic economic and communications installations were marked, the mine fields around the border were left unmarked, complicating humanitarian demining efforts.

Today, the Nicaraguan government reports that 85,000 mines remain in some 487 targeted areas, including 372 electrical towers, 44 bridges and 58 mine fields in border regions, with a bulk of the mines (50,000) located in remote areas along the Honduran border.

In all of Central America, Nicaragua has lost the largest number of victims to landmines. What makes Nicaragua such a critical case is the fact that mines were buried in populated areas, both on the border and in the interior of the country. In light of this, mine awareness efforts in Nicaragua must cover a vast area and reach a great number of people. Though it is extremely difficult to assess the number of victims, the Center of Strategic Studies in Nicaragua estimates there have been 424 victims from 1990 to 1998.

In an effort to involve Nicaraguan children, UNICEF, the Canadian Red Cross and the ICRC, in cooperation with the Center for International Studies (CEI) and the Nicaraguan Center for Strategic Studies (CEEN), have developed a program called Child-to-Child. In this program, student leaders and children between the ages of 12 and 15 are recruited to spread mine awareness to the affected regions. This group consists of approximately 300 students who have reached at least 20,000 children and teenagers in the affected regions.

Many civil society organizations have expressed their desire to participate in these programs. Although materials teaching mine awareness have been distributed to many communities, these groups have used community chats as their principal mechanism. Through these efforts, 743 communities have been evaluated, 33 of which were deemed high risk. It is these high-risk areas that are prioritized for mine awareness.

Unlike children who are victimized as a result of their curiosity, adults fall victim to these mines mainly due to the false notion that they can safely remove the mines themselves. In order to tackle this problem, mine awareness is conducted by holding town meetings and on a door-to-door basis. Victims who had attempted to remove landmines themselves speak, urging the people not to manipulate mines. Unfortunately, despite all this information, the need

to feed their families and the high dependence on agriculture continues to drive citizens to demine the fields themselves.

Honduras and Costa Rica

Unlike Nicaragua, the mine-affected communities in Costa Rica and Honduras are isolated areas near the border. Fortunately, these landmines do not pose as serious a threat to the population given that most of the mined areas have been identified and affected areas are remote.

Neither Costa Rica nor Honduras experienced war within their territories, but each suffered from the conflicts of neighboring countries. Land in Honduras served as base camps for the Nicaraguan Contra resistance in the south and for the Salvadorian Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in the North. An estimated 3,000 landmines are buried around the Honduras-Nicaragua border.

Costa Rica is the least affected country in Central America. Its problems arose when the Nicaraguan Contras established a base on the Costa Rican side of the border. Mostly Czech's PP-MI-SRII and other UXO were buried indiscriminately. The OAS office in Costa Rica emphasizes that, except for one accident involving a married couple in 1992, no accidents have occurred since the initiation of the program in this country.

In Honduras and Costa Rica, mine awareness is not considered to be a national issue. In 1995, the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) initiated mine awareness campaigns in cooperation with the Honduran Army and MARMINCA in suspected mined areas where demining was to take place. Unfortunately, due to limited resources, a continual awareness campaign has not been developed for the country.

"While Latin America's landmine situation may not be as publicized as that of Rwanda or Afghanistan, the same consequences still exist: civilians are victimized, development is stunted and...the peace process is jeopardized."

*UXO found in Honduras.
Photo c/o IADB*



*Above: MA education at Las Tirisas School Costa Rica.
Photo c/o Leda Marin*



Mine awareness education at an elementary school.
Photo c/o Lela Marin

In Costa Rica in 1998, the OAS and the country's Ministry of Public Defense also provided their own campaigns on mine awareness. Schools in the affected areas are visited three times a month, and a mine awareness class, which includes an exposition of actual deactivated mines, is given.

Guatemala

In Guatemala, humanitarian demining is an intrinsic part of the peace process. Since 1962, Guatemala has suffered from a civil conflict between its armed forces, death squads, paramilitary militias and Amerindian-based guerilla fractions.

On June 17, 1994, the "Agreement for the Resettlement of the Population Affected by the Armed Conflict" was signed in Oslo, Norway. Within Title II, it was established that a program should be executed to remove all types of mines, taking into account that the Guatemalan military and Union Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) must provide detailed information to the United Nations on the location of explosives and mines.

Unfortunately, the mine and UXO problem in Guatemala is not clearly defined. Mines and UXO are spread throughout the country, especially in former areas of conflict. The URNG guerrillas often employed homemade devices made from simple materials that contain no electronic parts or commercial military explosives. The most common of these is the so-called Claymore-type directional fragmentation mine. A number of unexploded grenades are also littered throughout the national territory.

The UCE estimates that 5,000 to 8,000 mines and UXO still threaten the Guatemalan population. During its long conflict, Guatemala counted a sig-

nificant number of landmine victims. The victim toll is estimated in the thousands.

When it comes to spreading awareness in the country, Guatemala is an interesting and complex case. Made up of a variety of indigenous groups each with their own distinct language and characteristics, the Guatemalan society poses many challenges to groups working to reach out to the entire country. Furthermore, it is not always easy to gain access to these communities due to lingering suspicions from past conflicts. One group, the CVB, has the advantage of being apolitical—a social institution trusted by the community.

Awareness programs in Guatemala are carried out by the CVB, who by decree have taken charge of public information, designing and executing a mine awareness campaign through the use of radio, television and newspapers as well as making direct contact with the population at risk.

As the community witnesses the joining of forces between the government, its own volunteer firemen and other members of civil society, it recognizes that the demining effort is a united one. This recognition serves to build the confidence once removed during past conflicts and open the channels of communication between the community and government officials. This exchange of information is critical to mine efforts because much of the information needed to identify mined areas is obtained through the inhabitants of the area.

With financial support from the OAS, the Volunteer Firemen Corps presents the demining program to the local authorities, community leaders, adults and students. This is also supported by house-to-house visits. This work is mainly done in the northern part of the country.

Peru and Ecuador

The people of Peru and Ecuador have been victims of a long-standing border dispute, making demining an important part of the peace process. From 1941 to 1995, Peru and Ecuador were engaged in armed conflict. During the conflict, an estimated 120,000 landmines were buried. On the border, the Amazonian indigenous people, the Shuar and Achuar in Ecuador and the Aguaruna and Huambiza in Peru, are the ones primarily affected by these landmines. It is estimated that since 1995, there have been over 100 landmine-related accidents. As part of the peace accords, Peru and Ecuador have agreed to destroy the mines on both sides of the border.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Peru was con-

fronted with the terrorist movement, the Sendero Luminoso and the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA). These movements targeted economically sensitive infrastructure leading the government to employ mines for the protection of these areas. Today, these mines present a greater threat to the population. There are approximately 2,000 electrical transmission towers with an estimated 20 to 40 mines buried near each. From 1989 to 1999, over 100 mine incidents were registered, with a little under half of these victims being youths. In 1999, homemade mines, supposedly buried by terrorists, claimed 16 casualties: 14 injured and two dead.

According to the U.N. Mine Action Service *Mine Action Assessment Mission Report on Ecuador*, there have been few organized mine awareness campaigns in Peru and Ecuador. In 1999, the U.S. Military Information Support Team produced and distributed some mine awareness posters and folders with prevention messages. The Ministry of Education, National Police and electric companies have recently shown interest and have begun developing mine awareness programs. Recognizing that a greater effort is necessary, the OAS is being urged by international



One of the many students learning about mine awareness.
Photo c/o Lela Marin

donors to take on the main role in creating and implementing a special humanitarian demining program that is crafted especially for this area.

Tackling the Issue

In 1991, the OAS established its Mine Clearance Assistance Program for Central America (PADCA) at the request of the affected countries. This program is mainly a humanitarian effort aimed at preventative education, rehabilitation of victims and reclamation of mined areas. In order to accomplish this, the OAS has created a program with the unit for the Promotion of Democracy (UPD) called the Comprehensive Action Against AP Mines (AICMA). This program addresses the following:

Comprehensive Action Against AP Mines:

Mine risk awareness education

Support for mine field surveying, mapping, marking and clearance

Victim assistance, including physical and psychological rehabilitation and the social and economic reintegration of cleared zones

Establishment of data bases on activities directed against AP mines

Ambassador Marlene Talbott, OAS Mine Action Principal Specialist, points out that mine awareness is a vital and indispensable part of any humanitarian demining program for many reasons. The first reason is to prevent the population from falling victim to these weapons. In some areas of Latin America, this is vital, due mostly in part to the ignorance that exists when it comes to the tremendous dangers of landmines. Mine awareness education in Latin America has been mainly targeted towards children who are considered to be at high risk because of their energy and curiosity.

As part of the effort to spread awareness to children, the U.S. Military Information Support team has investigated the populations in participating countries in order to decide which material would be best to inform the population of the problem. In 1999, the U.S. Special Forces in Managua, Nicaragua, delivered more than 60,000 calendars and bags containing pictures of mines and instructions on mine awareness to the PADCA coordinating office in Nicaragua for distribution to the program's countries.

With children in mind, organizations working for this cause—including the OAS, MARMINCA

continued on page 44

EMPOWERING

continued from page 39

and the U.S. Information Support teams—have made it a priority to visit schools in affected communities. During these visits, a representative speaks to the children about the dangers of mines and plays games with the children that teach them how to identify mine-filled areas. At this time, materials are also distributed including pencils, schoolbags, hats, posters and T-shirts. The most interesting and controversial of these materials is the Superman and Wonder Woman comic book created by UNICEF, DC Comics, the U.S. Department of State and the OAS. This comic book depicts children encountering mines in everyday situations. Through the use of the well-known superheroes, Superman and Wonder Woman, they are taught how to behave if they find themselves in a mine-filled area. This serves the double purpose of educating children and captivating them to the extent that they bring these comics home and pass on what they have learned to their parents who, unfortunately, most of the time are as unaware of the problem as their children.

Conclusion

As the progress made by each of these countries is examined, one realizes that there is still much to be done. For every child that is reached through one of the many government and social mine awareness programs, another is walking blindly upon a mine field. It is a tragic and devastating reality and one that continues to claim the lives of thousands around the world. As the OAS, the Red Cross and other organizations join forces to fight this battle through education and awareness, we begin to see that not only are countries demanding special programs and aid but even students are dedicating their time to spreading what they have learned. Yet it is difficult to trace exactly how much impact particular programs have had. However, we believe that “knowledge is power” in confronting the landmine problem. ■

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