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UNICEF in Latin America

Recognizing that children are the segment of the population most vulnerable to mine-affected areas, UNICEF has focused its efforts in Central America to disseminating mine awareness information, assisting mine victims and preventing future mine incidents in Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

by Mary Ruberry, MAIC

Background

As part of the United Nations system, in 1996 UNICEF began providing emergency aid for children impacted by war in Europe and China. Since then UNICEF has implemented programs worldwide to help children in need through their eight regional offices and 125 country offices. In the Latin American region, UNICEF focuses on four "problem" areas: Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua and Guatemala, and also aided El Salvador until 1994 during its post-conflict contamination.

Introduction

According to Ms. Nidia Quiroz, Regional Adviser for Emergencies in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNICEF-LAC), children are more vulnerable than adults to landmine explosions because of their natural curiosity, and also are injured more severely than adults because of their physical proximity to the ground. Whereas an adult might lose a limb in a mine accident, mines usually kill children, especially under the age of five.

UNICEF-LAC describes its work thus: "In the context of each affected country, UNICEF has given support to different kinds of programs that combat the consequences of these ar- 

dritic threats. Basically, there have been pre-

vention campaigns among the popula-

tion in situations of risk, with the participation of teachers, social workers, local governments and numerous NGOs."

Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

UNICEF has no political power and hence functions as a facilitator for activities more like a consultant. According to Ms. Quiroz, "We have the knowledge, experience and lessons learned" to help implement programs in countries affected by landmines and UXO. "In Central America, the conflicts are now finished. Now the problem is demining"—and prevention, which is achieved through mine awareness programs.

Financial constraints pose the largest obstacles for UNICEF in Latin America. Because demining is such an expensive process, UNICEF cannot engage in demining directly but instead works with volunteers and other international organizations to raise mine awareness. UNICEF begins by determining where landmines are located. Either military records or information gathered from communities provides essential knowledge for preventing mine and UXO accidents. Working with the Red Cross, UNICEF creates prevention programs that recruit volunteer youth who post signs where landmines are located. UNICEF programs disseminate information through schools and health centers in each affected country.

UNICEF reiterates "mine action strategies" as a means of ame-

lioring the effects of landmine con-

tainment. "Strategies" include ad-

dressing landmines on a diplomatic level, as well as championing advocacy for mine action through local, regional, national and international channels. Additionally, UNICEF cre-

ates a variety of partnerships in its many programs, joining with organi-

dations to develop a comprehensive mine prevention and assist mine victims.

UNICEF

UNICEF works with 13,000 children in Colombia on three different activities:

1. Through the Red Cross, UNICEF engages over 1,000 children marking mine locations.

2. Working with the Scouts, UNICEF concentrates on "hot spots" to prevent accidents with mine awareness programs.

3. With the Embassy of Canada, UNICEF trains radio promoters to disseminate information about landmines. At present, there are more than 100 radio shows in Colombia.

The Future in Colombia

UNICEF Colombia's strategy for 2001-2002 is based on a three-concept approach to mine action.

First, to actively support mine aware-

ness education with national civil and governmental allies. Second, to provide information about mine locations and effects of mines to the government, location authorities and communities. Third, UNICEF will be working with other national and international organizations to urge the Colombian government to place "high priority" to the issue of landmines, and support mine action activities such as survey, mine field marking, clearance operations and information gathering/dissemination. For the first time, the Colombian government has made a contribution from this year's national budget for a pilot program on mine awareness, data collection and victim assistance.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua's high number of AP mines threatens a particularly impoverished segment of the population, especially children who are often unable to interpret warning signs even when mine fields are clearly marked. Due to the high level of contamination, many farmers have been forced to engage in amateur demining in order to recapture their land for sustain-

ing life. UNICEF has identified the trend towards amateur demining as a serious problem in Nicaragua, along with an apparent lack of fear towards mines by adolescent and adult males.
Without a fully-integrated mine action program, efforts in Nicaragua have centered on clearence, leaving the development of other aspects of mine awareness education and victim assistance, lagging behind. According to UNICEF Nicaragua, the weakest component of mine action in the country remains the social reintegration of victims.

The aftermath of war has left not only landmine deposits but also a variety of UXO, including bombs, fragmentation grenades, mortars and ammunition. According to UNICEF Nicaragua, "one of the main reasons for accidents to children is that children do not know the potential danger of picking up, manipulating or playing with landmines and UXO." In conjunction with the Nicaraguan Red Cross, UNICEF Nicaragua has implemented the "Child-to-Child Prevention Project," which trains youth to raise awareness among other young people in Nicaragua about the dangers of landmines through workshops held in the five areas of the country with the worst mine contamination (Somoto, Ocotal, Jinotega, Matagalpa and Rivas).

Last October, UNICEF signed an agreement with the OAS to implement joint mine awareness activities. UNICEF also plans to develop a "community liaison" project as a way to ensure effective communication between demining units and local residents, and to build trust in the National Demining Plan, thus contributing to a decrease in amateur demining. The "community liaison" project (titled "Landmine and Unexploded Ordnance Awareness Education in Nicaragua Through Community Liaison") will also gather information about mine locations from community members to continually update the national plan.

Panama

In Panama, UXO—not landmines—threatens the population. Particularly, almost half of the land the United States returned via the 1999 Panam Canal Treaty was used as shooting ranges by the U.S. military. Infestation of the locked and marked acreage results in UXO detonations when locals retrieve scrap metal. Together with NGOs and the Ministry of Health and Education, UNICEF Panama has developed a UXO awareness program designed to address affected communities. UNICEF's involvement with mine action in Panama began with support for a study conducted in 1998 by the Ministry of Health to determine the socio-economic and cultural makeup of the former ranges' neighboring communities. Since then, UNICEF's goal has been to lessen the risk to local populations by raising awareness and educating the affected population on "safe behavior patterns." The partnership awareness program (called "Unexploded Ordnance Awareness Education in Panama") continues this year to "sanitize" 100,000 inhabitants within the 15 affected districts.

Other Affected Regions

In Peru and Ecuador, children have had to alter their daily routines because of mines planted along the border. And in Argentina, 30,000 AP mines remain where they were laid 10 years ago in the Malvinas Islands during the conflict with Great Britain.

Conclusion

As the U.N.'s "focal point" for mine awareness education, UNICEF pursues programs that reach affected populations with an aim to educate those at risk about the dangers of landmines and UXO. UNICEF professionals recognize that children are the most vulnerable segment of the endangered population because of their natural curiosity, mobility and usual inability to read. The programs in Central America disseminate information about landmines and UXO through public service channels and strive to gather information from local communities that can be used to prevent future tragedies.

UNICEF's national efforts are designed to address the particular situation found in each country. Working collaboratively with a gamut of organizations, UNICEF supports and creates projects that assist mine victims, helping to reintegrate them into society, all with an eye to aiding children. As Ms. Quintero says, "it is so important to save the lives of children."

[All photos courtesy of UNICEF]

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Colombia: 35 Years and Still Struggling

The civil wars in Colombia have caused the deaths and disappearances of many innocent victims. Guerrillas, insurgent groups and paramilitaries are all fighting to find peace, yet peace seems far away.

by Jenny Lange, MAIC

"I was nine when it happened. I worked with Papa in the fields. We had just cut down a vine to weave a basket when my friend stepped on a mine. He died, and the mine opened my stomach. My papa wrapped a towel around my stomach. I must have been unconscious because I have no memory of that. He told me about it at the hospital after I had had surgery." A young Colombian boy remembers his traumatic encounter with a landmine in Colombia. Encounters like these happen too often in Colombia, due to years of civil struggle. Landmines have been used by all fighting groups in Colombia in the country's war. The guerrillas, the government, the paramilitaries. The exact amount of landmines is unknown; some estimate over 80,000. The placerment of the mines is also unknown, yet they continue to take the lives of many innocent victims. In many areas, farmers would rather have their children stay at home to remain safe than to walk to school and gain an education. The civil war in Colombia has been devastating and long, and the end is not in sight.

During the last half of the twentieth century, Colombia suffered three major periods of conflict. The first, la violencia, was a result of a divided political system and involved a protracted but unsubstanted civil war. The second was the "war" against the Colombian state launched by Pablo Escobar of the Medellin cartel and other various drug traffickers. The third, and possibly the most dangerous eruption of violence, revolves around the current insurgencies, especially that of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Many contemporary news accounts label the conflict a "thirty-five year old civil war," basing its origin on the official formation of several guerrilla groups in the mid-1960s. However, the roots of the principal guerilla group, the FARC, date back to the peasant armed self-defense movements formed between 1948 and 1958 during the period of la violencia. The FARC and other guerrilla groups have been known to use landmines as a principle source of terrorism and continue to use the mines today against many innocent civilians, harming lives, education and the economy itself.

La Violencia

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Colombian politics was dominated by the Liberal and Conservative parties. The Liberals, led by Simón Bolivar, advocated for a constitutionalist state with a democratic government, while the Conservatives, led by Rafael Urdaneta, favored a more centralized and authoritarian state. The two parties were constantly at odds, with frequent political upheavals and civil wars that lasted for years, such as the 1843-1845 conflict that resulted in the death of thousands.

In 1890, the Conservatives won a landslide victory and established a new administration. However, this did not put an end to conflict, as the Liberals continued to challenge the government. This period of conflict, known as la violencia, lasted for decades and was marked by political assassinations, military coups, and armed struggle.

During this time, the United States became increasingly involved in the region, particularly due to its economic interests in Colombia's coffee exports. The U.S. government provided military and economic support to the Colombian government, which helped to exacerbate the conflict and maintain a status quo of political instability.

In 1903, the U.S. government signed the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty with Colombia, which effectively gave the U.S. control over the Panama Canal and allowed for the intervention of U.S. forces in Colombian affairs. This treaty was a source of contention for many Colombians, who saw it as an infringement of their sovereignty.

The period of la violencia came to an end in 1936 with the election of Gerardo Sixto Uribe Uribe as President. Uribe's government was marked by a period of relative peace and stability, as the Liberal and Conservative parties agreed to work together.

Despite this, the roots of conflict in Colombia were far from resolved, and the country would continue to face challenges in the years to come.

During the 1940s, the conflict took on a new form, with the rise of the war between the government and the guerrillas. This conflict, known as la guerra, lasted for decades and involved a range of groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the paramilitary groups. The conflict was marked by acts of violence committed against civilians, including the use of landmines. This period of conflict saw the rise of the Medellin cartel and other drug trafficking groups, which further fueled the conflict.

Today, Colombia remains one of the most violent countries in the world, and the legacy of la violencia continues to shape the country's political and social landscape. The conflict has left a deep scar on the nation, and efforts to achieve peace and reconciliation continue to be a top priority for the Colombian government and civil society.

[Photo of Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia rebels standing in formation during a practice ceremony outside of San Vicente. © AP]

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