August 2001

Colombia: 35 Years and Still Struggling

CISR JMU

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal

Part of the Defense and Security Studies Commons, Emergency and Disaster Management Commons, Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol5/iss2/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.
Without a fully-integrated mine action program, efforts in Nicaragua have centered on clemency, leaving 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, mortar 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 land mines through workshops held in the five areas of the country with the worst mine contamination: Seminole, Osoala, 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 awareness. The “community liaison” project (called “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 Panama Canal Treaty was used as shooting ranges by the U.S. military. Infestation of the boiled and stacked acreage results in UXO detonations when locals retrieve scrap metal. Together with NGOs and the Ministries of Health, Education and Foreign Affairs, UNICEF 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 socioeconomic 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 “sensitize” 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. In Argentina, some 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. “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. For Ms. Quirós says, “it is so important to save the lives of children.”

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 papai 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, from the country’s army, the guerrillas and the paramilitaries. The exact amount of landmines is unknown; some estimate over 80,000. The placement 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 latter 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 and brutal 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, revolved 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 guerrilla 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, with occasional interludes of military rule. Internal conflicts身边
Conservative parties whose influence was felt throughout the whole country. Differences in ideology between the Liberal and Conservative elite echelons throughout Colombian society, many times resulting in outbreaks of violence that placed the Liberal and Conservative against each other. Conservative candidate Laureano Gomez won the presidential election in 1958, after two high-ranking members of the Liberal party were assassinated in 1949. Gomez considered Liberal military offensives against the peasant Liberals, known as the War of Villarica. It was during this offensive that the armed self-defense movements formed, later to be known as the FARC.

The FARC, Guerrillas and Cocaine

FARC is the most powerful guerrilla group in Latin America comprised of 17,000 members, which is more than the Colombian government, and is accountable for numerous deaths. It is the only guerrilla group with peasant roots that pre-date both the National Front and the Cuban Revolution. Other guerrilla groups, such as the Popular Army of Liberation (EPL) and the Army for National Liberation (Eln), were all movements led by urban intellectuals. Initially, the FARC was concerned with the socio-economic issues of peasantry and poverty, but it is believed that the traditional insurgent group has grown into a traditional criminal or drug trafficking organization.

Naturally, the FARC leadership denies all involvement in drug trafficking. Yet relationships are known between the drug traffickers and FARC guerrillas. The most prevalent relationship is one in which the FARC unit provides protection in return for money or payment in cocaine. Yet, others argue that FARC is not only involved with drug cultivation areas and laboratories, but includes the transportation of drugs and chemical precursors and in some cases, direct control of cocaine producing laboratories. Raul Beers, Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, argues that the FARC and the Eln, the other major insurgent group, "are receiving pure cocaine in payment for services provided to the drug traffic, and reselling it" to Brazilian criminal organizations in return for armaments. Evidence has shown that the FARC is attempting to widen its base of arm suppliers. Despite an estimated annual income of $500 million (U.S.), FARC purchases significant amounts of weapons with cocaine. FARC leaders say they will continue to use money from illicit drugs, not only cocaine but heroin and marijuana, to finance their escalating war.

Half of Colombia's territory is now controlled by the Marxist guerrilla in league with cocaine growers and drug traffickers. This controlled territory is spilling over into neighboring countries with reports of guerrilla incursions into Venezuela, Panama and Ecuador, as well as sightings of coca and poppy plantations in Peru operated by Colombians. These guerrilla groups are guilty of using landmines throughout the country. One report visited Colombia and studying the social strife notes "Coca profits fuel Colombia's war just as surely as extortion and kidnaping. And much of the fighting going on in Colombia is rooted in a struggle over who gets to control the money flow."

The Threat of Landmines

Nearly all major guerrilla groups have publicly acknowledged that they not only use but also manufacture AP mines. The Colombian Armed Forces have identified and denounced the production of AP mines by Colombian guerrilla groups. Most of these mines are homemade, using cheap and easy to find materials. According to the Colombian Army's Press Agency, in the past few years there has been an increase in the use of homemade antivehicle mines by guerrilla groups. The antivehicle mines are manufactured with gas, oxygen or refrigerating cylinders.

AP mines are also manufactured and used by cocaine, poppy and marijuana growers to protect illegal drug crops, and to keep the Army and others away from their laboratories and stockrooms. Information collected by the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines (CCBM) indicates that at least 135 of Colombia's 1,050 municipalities are mine-affected. The 135 municipalities cover a total area of 145,000 square kilometers or 13% of the national territory.

Colombia's Armed Forces reported that 52 mines placed in San Jose de Surupampa department were discovered on February 28, 2000. The mines were found along village paths, around the school and football field, and near the radio transmission station on Granada Mountains.

In November of 2000, two land mines were discovered outside a town house before a U.S. senator and the U.S. ambassador were scheduled to visit. Though the U.S. officials were not the intended targets, they could have been victim to the mines.

One author reported on the incidence of landmine victims. "In their attacks, guerrillas employ methods that cause avoidable civilian casualties in violation of international humanitarian law, including the use of landmines and gas canister bombs packed with gunpowder and shrapnel."

Colombia signed the Mine Ban Treaty on December 3, 2000, but has not yet ratified it. Other attempts to legally control the production and use of landmines have been implemented. Colombia voted in favor of the December 1999 UN General Assembly resolution supporting the Mine Ban Treaty, and participated as an observer in the First Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty in Maputo in May 1999.

Conclusion

Some fear that the likely outcome in Colombia is "stalemate," complete with corrupt officials, black marketers, narco-traffickers and of course, the insurgents. The country's never-ending cycle is far from ending, and the population continues to live in fear. More has to be done for the country besides stopping the drug cartels. The problem's roots reach back to a long-lived civil war of peasantry and socio-economic issues. The social and political unrest is left in the hands of insurgent guerrilla groups and drug traffickers. Where to begin in order to see the end is something Colombia has been and will be anticipating for years.

Contact Information

Jenny Lange
Mine Action Information Center
James Madison University
1 Court Square
Harrisonburg, VA 22807
Tel: (540) 568-2810
E-mail: langeje@jmu.edu