August 2001

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The History of Demining in Nicaragua

Nicaragua's civil war of the 1980s left the country ridden with landmines. Since 1989 a number of organizations have been working in Nicaragua to overcome obstacles and improve the country's landmine situation.

by Elizabeth Beery Adams, MAIC

Background

Nicaragua is a country with a history of armed conflicts. The most recent of these conflicts is the civil war of the 1980s, which left behind a legacy of landmines. Landmines were first used in Nicaragua by the National Guard during the Guerra de Liberación or Sandinista Revolution from 1978-1979. Their use during this conflict, however, was limited and precise. It was not until the civil war two years later that they were used in large quantities.

The civil war in Nicaragua lasted from 1981 to 1989 and was fought between the Sandinista government and the US-backed Counter-revolutionaries (Contras). During the conflict, both sides employed landmines, targeting such areas as key bridges, roadways and power sources. The Nicaraguan military planted 135,643 mines, mostly along the borders in an effort to deter Contra movement into the national territory from neighboring Honduras where they were operating. The Contras also planted mines, but the number and location of those employed is unknown because no records were kept.

Summary of the Problem

The landmines that remain today are principally along Nicaragua's northern border and primarily affect the rural population, as they prevent the utilization of large areas of land for agriculture and ranching. They also obstruct the use and expansion of key infrastructure such as roadways, bridges, power sources and communications. This severely affects Nicaragua's ability to develop economically. Major Sergio Ugarte of the Nicaraguan Engineer Corps says it is because of this that "demining in Nicaragua is a task of utmost importance, fundamentally humanitarian in nature, which represents an important component in the peace process, socioeconomic stabilization and the consolidation of democracy. It constitutes a task of primary importance for the army as well as for the government and civil society as a whole."

History of Demining in Nicaragua

Because of the increasing consciousness that demining was going to be a crucial part of the pacification and rebuilding processes, the government of Nicaragua, via military resources, initiated the first demining operations in 1989. These demining operations are generally considered military responsibility, although other organizations are well involved.

Demining in Nicaragua has been divided into four stages according to the type and amount of support given to uphold the efforts.

Stage 1: 1989-1992

This stage was initiated in 1989 because of the government's consciousness of the problems posed to the reestablishment of infrastructure, production and economic activities. General demining objectives were developed that would shape all future mine-related activities in Nicaragua, such as:

- Clearing mined areas
- Reducing the risk of mine-related accidents
- Rehabilitating mined areas to make them productive
- Repairing and maintaining energy services and infrastructure previously affected by mines.

This phase was also characterized by the development of specific, immediate objectives that were carried out by the Army using basic equipment that offered little protection.

In 1990 the Nicaraguan government solicited help from the Organization of American States (OAS) to evaluate the mine situation in Nicaragua with the aim of developing a National Demining Plan. The OAS responded by designating a team of experts from the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) to oversee the operation. The UED used in these operations were units made up of 27 men outfitted with special equipment. They developed valuable experience in this type of operation and were crucial to the establishment of strong relationships and coordination with the OAS and IADB.

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This stage was suspended in November of 1993 because of lack of funding; however, during the operations 2,373 mines were destroyed, 60 targets were demined, and 27,643 square meters were declared mine free.

Stage 3: 1994-1995

Though Stage 2 operations had been halted, the Army recognized the importance of continuing to demine. They continued to develop operations with the support of the government and funds from state institutions such as the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure and the National Enter-
More difficult to find and remove. Flooding and winds also damaged some of the equipment used in the demining operations, causing further delays. The population at risk from landmines has increased significantly because the mines have been scattered to previously mine-free areas.

Other Aspects of the National Demining Program

Mine awareness and victim assistance are integral parts of the National Demining Plan. There has been an ongoing educational campaign focusing on the prevention of mine-related accidents. Fundamental elements of this campaign include the labeling of mine fields, a mass media campaign using television and radio, educational materials and mine awareness training. The National Demining Commission has formed a subcommission, the Subcommission on Education on the Prevention of Mine-Related Accidents, to deal with this aspect of demining directly.

Several NGOs are also involved in mine awareness and victim assistance programs in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Center for Strategic Studies and the Nicaraguan Red Cross both run programs in which they train local people to promote mine awareness and victim assistance. PADCA helps to fund the mine awareness programs presented by the Army, and UNICEF is becoming more involved in both mine awareness and victim assistance efforts in Nicaragua.

Results Thus Far

Although there is still much to be done, Nicaragua has had relative success in its demining efforts thus far. UEDs have destroyed 64,874 mines and demined 640 of 991 targets, clearing 32 of the 62 municipalities and almost half of the borderland. They have been able to rehabilitate 2,120,136 square meters of land, benefiting 668,009 people.

Goals for 2001

In the coming year, Nicaragua's demining goals are to:

• Destroy 11,684 planted mines.
• Destroy 45,000 stockpiled anti-personnel mines (aiming to finish destruction of stockpiles in December 2002).
• Employ demining machinery donated by Japan.
• Declare Chinandega, Boaco, Chontales and Region Autonomia del Atlantico Sur mine free.

Stories from Ocoatl

Contact Information

Major Serjo Ugarte
Chief of Staff
Nicaraguan Engineer Corps
Managua, Nicaragua
Tel: 505-222-7770
Fax: 505-222-4546
E-mail: sugartea@ideay.com.ni

Contact Information

Rachel Willerman
Landmine Survivors Network
1420 K Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005
Tel: 202-464-0007
E-mail: Raquel@landminesurvivors.org

*All photos courtesy of the Landmine Survivors Network.

Conclusion

The civil war of the 1980s scattered landmines throughout Nicaragua, chronically affecting the growth of the country's economy. Thus, in 1989 the government began the first of its four stages of demining. From its use of basic demining equipment to advancements towards mine-detecting dogs and large mechanical devices, Nicaragua has been relatively successful in its demining efforts, despite setbacks such as Hurricane Mitch. The populace now looks ahead towards completion of their future goals, in hopes of ridding Nicaragua of landmines completely.

Contact Information

Major Serjo Ugarte
Chief of Staff
Nicaraguan Engineer Corps
Managua, Nicaragua
Tel: 505-222-7770
Fax: 505-222-4546
E-mail: sugartea@ideay.com.ni

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1420 K Street N.W.
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Tel: 202-464-0007
E-mail: Raquel@landminesurvivors.org

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Diciembre 11/22, al Oscar O台词, Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua
Rachel Wilkenn
Landmine Survivors Network
420K Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005
Tel: 202-464-0007
E-mail: Raquel@landmineservices.org

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