

Landmines: A Deadly Reminder of Chile's Military Past

Although the fighting is long over, a number of anti-personnel landmines still remain in Chile, posing a threat to civilians even today. With casualties increasing, the people are calling on the government to take action.

by Louise Egan, *Journalist*

A Killer in Disguise

Like many Chileans, Gustavo Soto always thought the snowcapped Andean mountains that tower ominously over the eastern fringe of this long, narrow country were the most peaceful place on earth. But a nightmarish experience two years ago taught him that the majestic Andes, patches of the Atacama Desert in the north, and the picturesque islands of Patagonia in the south are riddled with one of the world's cruelest weapons.

During a roadside stop on a remote mountain pass in northern Chile, Soto spotted a green plastic disc "a little bigger than a wristwatch" that he mistook for a lid from a water container. He carelessly picked it up and plunked it onto the dashboard of the pickup truck he was traveling in. As he and his friends set off again, the truck lurched into gear and the "lid" began to slide. Soto instinctively slammed his hands down on it.

"The truck just tore apart. The floor blew off, the roof was ripped right through. All I felt was the explosion, but I realized right away that I had lost my hands," Soto said, holding up the two knobby stumps that prevent him from pulling on his own socks or taking a bus by himself. Police said the "lid" turned out to be a U.S.-built M14 anti-personnel landmine, one of 300,000 the United States exported to Chile in the early



■ Protest marches for land and better living conditions have been carried out by Mapuche Indians in Chile's capital. c/o AP

years of Gen. Augusto Pinochet's 1973-1990 military dictatorship, according to U.S. Defense Department information cited by Human Rights Watch.

Triggered by downward pressure, the M14 is specially designed to maim but not kill, a strategy military analysts say is based on the premise that a wounded soldier is more of a liability to the enemy than a dead one. Yet Pinochet's anti-Communist regime did not deploy the weapon with an internal enemy in mind, unlike other landmine-infested nations like Colombia and Nicaragua.

Mined Borders

Between 1974 and 1978, Chile's army and navy dotted the sparsely populated, rugged terrain along its borders with Peru, Bolivia and Argentina with 293 minefields containing between 250,000 and 1 million anti-personnel and anti-tank landmines. Relations with neighboring countries were at an all-time low, and Pinochet wanted to protect frontier zones. After more than 20 years, those conflicts are long forgotten, but the landmines remain, a fearful reminder of Chile's murky military past.

"Chile today is very different from then. Even at the time [the weapon] was used, it was part of Chile's defensive policy," said Undersecretary of War Gabriel Gaspar. Gaspar insists the mine fields are still safely fenced off and marked, posing a danger only to daredevils. "If someone is looking for high risk, they will find it," he said.

But Soto, one of 26 reported cases of civilian landmine casualties in Chile, takes offense at the government's lack of concern and is suing for about \$800,000, the estimated cost of prostheses for his hands and the medical costs of the accident, in which he also lost an eye and suffered burns. "The state is supposed to be responsible for what happens to its citizens," he said. Despite Defense Minister Mario Fernandez's personal promise to settle his case out of court, a disillusioned Soto says he received "nothing but promises." Other landmine survivors feel similarly abandoned. Elias Moscoso, a 15-year-old Aymara Indian from a village in the Andean Highlands, lost part of his right hand in 1996 after picking up a shiny object in

the middle of the road. His lawsuit against the state was thrown out of court.

Treaty to End Government Secrecy

Calling the information "reserved," government secrecy surrounding the landmine problem means nobody really knows exactly how many mines there are in Chile or where they are. The government has also resisted pressures to demine the borders, arguing that its struggling economy cannot afford the estimated \$250 million cost. Many of the mines are plastic, making detection by conventional metal detectors impossible, it says.

But that may change soon. May 3, the Chilean Congress ratified the Ottawa Convention, coming a step closer to joining the 140 other nations worldwide that have joined the 1997 pact. The treaty obliges countries to clear their territory of all landmines, destroy stockpiles and report to the United Nations secretary general the total number, type and location of any remaining landmines. The Defense Ministry says two local munitions factories churned out five models in the 1970s and 1980s. One was an army facility and the other was owned by Carlos Cardoen, an eccentric Chilean tycoon. Cardoen figures in a U.S. Customs list, published on May 7, of the ten most wanted fugitives in Latin America with a \$500,000 reward for information on his whereabouts.

The U.S. Department of Justice's Criminal Division issued a warrant for Cardoen's arrest in 1993 for the alleged illegal export of U.S.-made zirconium and parts to make cluster bombs. The warrant said Cardoen was a major supplier of cluster bombs to Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq during the 1980s. Once the mine ban treaty goes into effect for Chile, the government will have a maximum of 30 years to clear their mine fields. Until then, Gustavo Soto's advice is: "watch your step." ■

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