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These Firemen are Deminers: An Interview with Mr. Guillermo Pacheco, Program Coordinator of the Assistance Program for Demining in Guatemala

Guillermo Pacheco discusses Guatemala's landmine situation and explains how volunteer firefighters are lending a hand in demining activities.

The volunteer firefighters of Guatemala participate in a land retrieval ceremony in Ixcán, Guatemala. c/o OAS



by Elizabeth Beery Adams, MAIC

Elizabeth Adams (EA): How did the firemen get involved with demining?

Guillermo Pacheco (GP): In 1995 Legislative Order 60-95 determined that the firefighters would be an essential part of the demining process prior to the publication of the Legislative Order. The Volunteer Firefighters were trained by a German NGO in 1994.

EA: Why did they get involved with demining?

GP: At the end of the armed conflict in Guatemala, it was a very sensitive issue that the army get directly involved with the affected population. Therefore, the Guatemalan government decided that the use of the Volunteer Firefighters was a good option for mine awareness tasks and public information.

EA: What type of training did they receive?

GP: The National Demining Plan defines clearly the specific functions of each participating institution. The assigned function of the firefighters is information and mine awareness, and based on this, they were trained to participate in level 1 and level 2 surveys.

EA: What is the mine situation in Guatemala?

GP: The National Plan of Demining and Unexploded Ordnance Destruction is being carried out in the country. Even though landmines are found, the biggest problem in Guatemala is the unexploded ordnance. The National Plan is projected to complete this process in the year 2005. At this moment, the operations are being executed in the communities considered to be "high-risk."

EA: How do you find out where the mines are?

GP: A mine awareness campaign is conducted in affected areas, and the population of the areas provides the information to the official authorities. Additionally, former combatants of the URNG [Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca], work as guides in the demining process.

EA: Who decides clearance priorities?

GP: The Executive Coordinating Unit [Unidad Coordinadora Ejecutiva (UCE)], which is responsible to the Demining Commission of the Guatemalan Congress, is the entity in which one representative of each organization participates. The UCE makes the decisions about priorities for demining and unexploded ordnance operations.

EA: Do you work with other organizations?

GP: The Guatemalan Congress, the Guatemalan Army, the Volunteer

Firefighters and the former combatants of URNG are all involved in demining operations in Guatemala.

EA: Do you get involved in teaching the community mine awareness?

GP: As part of the mine awareness campaign, the Volunteer Firefighters and former combatants of the URNG teach directly to schools of the affected communities.

EA: How does the community report finding mines?

GP: Local communities can inform the local authorities or go to the stations of the volunteer firefighters. In some cases, they can report this information to local radio stations.

EA: Do the firemen do surveys? Map mine fields?

GP: The volunteer firefighters conduct level 1 and 2 surveys to locate and mark hazards.

EA: Do they assist mine victims?

GP: In case of accidents, they may also provide first aid to victims.

EA: Have they suffered any injuries?

GP: Not at all!

EA: Do they have equipment needs?

GP: The OAS Assistance Program for Demining in Central America has provided the necessary equipment for their mission.

EA: Do they receive funding for demining?

GP: Yes, through the Government Demining Coordination Commission, but the funds are insufficient for full development of the program. The OAS Assistance Program for Demining in Central America provides additional funds to complete the tasks.

EA: How does the local community feel about these demining efforts? How do the firemen's families feel about it?

GP: Volunteer firefighters have been very well received by the population. The local people feel very confident in dealing with the firefighters. In the case of the second question, the families of the firefighters are always worried about a potential accident.

EA: What are the plans for the future?

GP: To continue participating in demining operations and successfully fulfill the very important task of our mine awareness campaign. ■

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