

Marshall Legacy Institute: Providing Aid to Nicaragua

The Marshall Legacy Institute is a non-profit organization that works internationally "to alleviate suffering, restore hope and create conditions that nurture stability." In 1998, they began to assist Nicaragua in demining and promoting mine awareness countrywide.

by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

Background

After Hurricane Mitch struck Central America in late October of 1998, the Marshall Legacy Institute (MLI) was asked to survey the damage. Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua were all affected by the storm and while the severe physical damage was suffered by Honduras, Nicaragua experienced the most displaced mines.

Nicaragua's topography made it easy for rushing water brought in by Mitch to pick up landmines and move them to unknown locations. For Nicaraguans, this presented a huge problem—in everything from fixing almost 60 bridges that had been destroyed in the hurricane to allowing civilians to resume everyday tasks in their backyards. MLI aided the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) in Nicaragua's recovery from their displaced landmine problem.

Beginning Mine Awareness Efforts in Nicaragua

After assessing Nicaragua's landmine situation in August 2000, MLI began helping with the country's landmine situation. They were given a Congressional Appropriation of \$2 million (U.S.) to support their demining projects,



■ With help from MLI, eight mine detection dogs were dispatched to Nicaragua.

and eight demining dogs were immediately dispatched to Nicaragua, joining the four already at work there.

The MLI also established a mine awareness cell in Nicaragua to work with the country's National Demining Commission, helping carry out present and future demining plans. The cell currently consists of two Nicaraguans who were hired, trained and equipped to deal with mine awareness issues. The current project includes developing strategies for promoting mine awareness and will last until November 2001.

One of the cell's most recent projects has been to develop a mine-awareness textbook for Nicaraguan children. The textbook that the cell has created is geared towards Nicaraguan children, written in the local language and designed to be easily understood. The book should be completed by the next school year (2002) so that it can be distributed in classrooms in order to reach the widest audience of children possible.

Farmers are also affected by landmines. They present a bigger problem in terms of increasing mine awareness because they do not congregate in one place as children do in school. Some of the methods the cell uses to reach farmers include:

- Using mass media (e.g., radio)
- Putting on plays in different regions
- Conducting programs or seminars
- Talking to influential community members who will spread the word

While these techniques are not as straightforward as writing textbooks for schoolchildren, they are probably the most reliable way to spread mine awareness in this demographic.

In addition to spreading awareness throughout the Nicaraguan community, MLI and the mine awareness cell have been working with the army and the government of Nicaragua to coordinate their efforts. Also, a database is being built to store all of Nicaragua's mine-related information and aid in future mine awareness activity.

Victim Assistance: Helping Julio Perez

At a ceremony announcing Nicaragua's ratification of the Mine Ban Treaty, the President of Nicaragua asked the U.S. Ambassador if he could find assistance for a young boy whose life had been tragically altered by a landmine incident. While chasing rabbits in a field near his hometown of Juigalpa, 12-year-old Julio Perez found a metal object and began playing with it, unaware that it was a landmine. It exploded, destroying one eye and badly damaging the other, while also cutting off a portion of his arm below the elbow. The available facilities in Nicaragua were not sufficient to treat Julio, so the ambassador set out to find aid for him in the U.S.

Word of Julio's story came to the Marshall Legacy Institute through the U.S. Department of State's Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs. By pulling together NGOs and private donors, MLI was able to transport Julio and his mother to New York last July, where doctors operated on and cared for the boy over a period of five months. While restoring his vision was impossible because of the extensive damage he had sustained in both eyes, doctors were able to increase his light perception. Also, instead of getting Julio a prosthetic arm, they actually rebuilt his arm by adding to the bone and covering it with skin so he can control its movement and maintain feeling in it.

According to Perry Baltimore at the Marshall Legacy Institute, Julio's case "has spearheaded our campaign in Nicaragua." Julio's story has been told to many audiences to promote mine awareness, especially in Nicaragua. This incident emphasizes the need to educate children about the dangers of landmines and helps Nicaraguans realize how close to home the problem is.

Conclusion

MLI has helped Nicaragua gain a better focus on landmine issues after the devastating effects of Hurricane Mitch. It has coordinated efforts with a number of groups, including NGOs, the local Red Cross and the Organization of American States (OAS) to improve the safety of Nicaraguan citizens.



■ Dan Layton (MLI) and Yamil Moreno (Director of Mine Awareness & Information in Nicaragua) present a check to Julio Perez, a 12-year-old landmine victim and his mother. MLI brought them to New York for six months of medical care.

Nicaragua's future looks hopeful. The country is beginning to train its own demining dogs in an effort to make the country landmine free. Nicaragua's next big landmine-related event is coming up in September 2001, when the country will host the International Campaign to Ban Landmines' (ICBL) Third Meeting of States Parties, where it will both celebrate progress made so far and look to the future. ■

**All photos courtesy of Marshall Legacy Institute*

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