

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 5
Issue 2 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 22

August 2001

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CISR JMU

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Recommended Citation

JMU, CISR (2001) "UXO in Panama," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 22.
Available at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol5/iss2/22>

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UXO in Panama

With no party assuming responsibility for thousands of acres of UXO-infested land, the fate of Panama's ex-United States artillery ranges remains unresolved. The grueling task of transforming the unusable land falls to the Explosive Ordnance Disposal community leaving the tainted ground waiting for release.

by Keith Feigenbaum, MAIC

Unlike a number of other Latin American countries, Panama's political situation and the resulting military unrest have neither caused nor contributed to its current UXO contamination. While the cause of UXO contamination in Panama is clear—the use of once U.S.-owned military bases as practice artillery ranges—officials for the United States and Panama generally disagree on the current state of those practice ranges and what should be done to cure the country of its UXO “problem” (not to mention the most pressing question of exactly who should oversee the clearance efforts). The purpose of this article is not to take sides, place blame or to make moral judgements in this matter. Rather, the purpose is to present the facts on UXO contamination in Panama. Regardless of who placed UXO in Panama or who holds the responsibility for removing the UXO, this matter remains a technical issue that needs to be revealed and dealt with in the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) community.



■ A Panamanian Ecological Police sergeant looks at old ordnances left in a training field. c/o AP

Background

UXO contamination in Panama is limited to three former U.S. military bases along the Panama Canal. U.S. military officials have been using the Empire, Balboa West and Piña firing ranges on these bases for artillery practice for about 70 years. Under the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977, these bases were returned to Panamanian control in 1999. Prior to the return of the 37,300 Canal Zone acres, the U.S. Department of State's Interagency Working Group (IWG) on Demining recognized the Panamanian government's concern that the remaining UXO would not be cleared before the return of the ranges. However, the IWG refuted Panama's claim that the United States was contractually and morally responsible for clearing UXO from the vacated ranges.

An IWG statement from June 1998 expressed the United State's view of the matter as “a range remediation issue, not a humanitarian demining one.” Thus, the United States does not view the ranges as land fit to be developed for commercial or residential purposes. Rather, the U.S. military recommended that the ranges be sealed off. The statement continues, “U.S. humanitarian demining funds should not be used to clear current or former U.S. military ranges, since this would set a precedent of using U.S. humanitarian demining assistance to clear former U.S. military bases and ranges around the world.”

This statement is the official position of the U.S. government—a position that stands today. Thus, any efforts by Panama to pressure the United States into returning to the sites to conduct UXO removal, which is estimated to cost between \$400 million (U.S.) to \$1 billion, have been met with this response. According to an article in the April 26, 2000 issue of *Ottawa Citizen*, the United States maintains that it did, in fact, clean up most of the sites, having removed 8,500 pieces of UXO and about 60 tons of shrapnel from the ranges. Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. George Rhynedance told the *Ottawa Citizen* that the Panama Canal Treaty requires the United States to clear the ranges “to the extent practicable.” However, the United States deemed much of the Canal Zone to be unfit for clearance for environmental reasons.

Current Situation

After decades of bombardment by various munitions, the Empire, Balboa West and Piña ranges are reported to contain about 120,000 pieces of UXO. Michael E. Short of Tennessee's EOD Technology, Inc. (EODT), a provider of ordnance and explosives services, reported his findings from EODT's attempts to remove some of these munitions in “UXO and the Panama Canal.” Short reported that from March 1998 through August 1999 the EODT dealt with the unique challenges of removing explosives from

the Canal Zone's jungle terrain. While dealing with the sharp 12 to 20 feet-high kuna grasses, he explains that EOD specialists faced a wide variety of explosives. These included: UXO, 60 mm and 81 mm mortars, 40 mm HE, 105 mm and 155 mm, AT-4, 90 mm and 106 mm RR, 2.36 3.5, SMAW, LAW, 2.75, specialty rounds and submunitions. In order to clear some of these munitions, EODT used procedures ranging from the burning of cut vegetation to the use of defoliants and heavy duty weed eaters. The presence of numerous holes, craters, ravines, streams and steep hills in the jungle terrain also limited the use of vehicles, which were cut off from project areas during the rainy season.

Conclusion

Though neither Panama nor the U.S. agrees on responsibility for removing UXO along the Canal, a solution must be reached for restoring the land to a safe and usable state. Because no one player stands accountable for environmental restoration, it is up to the EOD community to tackle the mammoth task of returning healthy land to the Panamanian people. In the meantime, the ex-ranges wait as prisoners of their own contamination, cut off from the rest of the world, in a state of dormant disuse. ■