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Victim Assistance in Central America: IGOs, NGOs and Governments Team Up

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Victim Assistance in Central America: IGOs, NGOs and Governments Team Up

The OAS, PAHO and UNICEF step in to bolster the activities of NGOs and governments to meet the needs of landmine survivors for rehabilitation and socioeconomic integration.

**Introduction**

As with other mine-affected regions, Central America must respond to the human consequence of landmines: the survivors. After years of dominance by clearance operations, victim assistance and economic reintegration are now beginning to receive heightened attention in the region. Both the OAS and PAHO (the Pan-American Health Organization) have launched victim assistance programs in Central America, teaming up with government ministries, and local and international NGOs to expand and improve services for survivors.

All of the Central American countries are grappling with the challenges of economic reintegration, while the capability to meet the needs for rehabilitation is being enhanced through training programs organized by the OAS, PAHO and UNICEF, and involving international NGOs such as:

- The International Society for Prosthetics and Orthotics (ISPO),
- Center for International Rehabilitation (CIR),
- Physicians Against Land Mines (PALM),
- Vietnamese Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF), and
- The World Rehabilitation Fund (WRF).

Various international NGOs also assist with the direct provision of prosthetics and orthotics, although most of the patient services are carried out by local NGOs and government agencies.

**El Salvador**

El Salvador, the first country in the region to be cleared of landmines, has some well-established rehabilitation and reintegration programs. The German organization MEDICO International, along with Medical Aid for El Salvador, helped establish the Organization for the Promotion of Disabled Persons of El Salvador (PODES) in 1992. The VVAF stepped in to provide PODES with funding and technical assistance. PODES continues to operate the largest rehabilitation program in El Salvador with a current caseload of over 900 patients and a staff of 23 employed in workshops and administrative offices (see VVAF website: http://www.vvaf.org/humanitarian/el_salvador.html).

PODES is one of several NGOs in El Salvador devoted to victim assistance. The World Rehabilitation Fund (WRF) in recent years teamed up with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to provide technical assistance to seven different Salvadoran organizations involved in providing a range of rehabilitation and reintegration services. The project served to bolster the rehabilitation services and has benefited ex-Salvadoran military and ex-FMLN combatants as well as civilians (see WRF website: http://www.worldrehabfund.org/programs/elsalvador.html).

**Guatemala**

Overall, in Guatemala as well as in Nicaragua, victim assistance programs have only recently begun to gain increased attention by governmental and NGO officials who have tended to focus on clearance operations. However, NGOs such as the Center for Attention to the Disabled of the Guatemalan Army (CADEG) and the Guatemalan Rehabilitation Association (AGREL) have provided a measure of assistance.

**Nicaragua**

The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), Handicap International (HI), World Rehabilitation Fund (WRF) and Mercy Ships all have played a role in providing prostheses for landmine survivors in Nicaragua. However, the principal provider of rehabilitation services in Nicaragua is the Ministry of Health. In addition to services available at two Managua hospitals, Aldo Chavarría and Lenin Fonseca, a private rehabilitation center, CENAPRORTO (Centro Nacional de Producción de Ayudas Técnicas y Elementos Oromotores), provides a range of services to landmine survivors as well as others in need of rehabilitation.

**OAS Victim Assistance**

The OAS victim assistance program provides funds to cover the cost of transportation, lodging and services for individual victims at CENAPRORTO. The center provides prosthetic and orthotic services as well as physical rehabilitation therapy and psychological counseling. It is a residential facility where patients stay while receiving services. Since 1996, the OAS has assisted over 320 landmine survivors through its program in Nicaragua and essentially every victim in need of assistance who has come to the attention of the OAS has been assisted at CENAPRORTO.

**Economic Reintegration**

Another new initiative of the OAS in Nicaragua is to launch a pilot program in association with the National OAS officials to foster economic reintegration for landmine survivors. The pilot program will provide job training, start-up capital and job placement assistance to some 40-50 landmine survivors. The program will focus on providing practical help. - **Victim Assistance Seminar**

In June 2001, the OAS helped organize a three-day seminar in Managua on victim assistance. The first two days were devoted to training seminars conducted by the Center for International Rehabilitation (CIR). The seminars included hands-on instruction as well as an orientation to a new CIR-developed Internet course. The third day was devoted to information sharing among personnel involved in providing assistance to landmine victims. The participant list illustrates the large and varied role that local NGOs play in providing victim assistance in the region. However, some Nicaraguan NGOs have criticized the National Demining Commission for not effectively including them in the planning process and for not adequately addressing the needs for mine awareness education and victim assistance programs.

**Victim Assistance in Central America**

Miguelo Marín, Vanegas, pictured with her nephew, lost both legs in 1999 when she stepped on a landmine near San Francisco Libre while working as a cook for the Nicaraguan Army. In June 2001, she was being fitted for prostheses and receiving rehabilitation therapy at CENAPRORTO. OAS/MAC

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Other Programs in Central America

Net Corps Americas

Although the OAS is emphasizing vocational training in its Nicaragua program, information technology and the Internet are becoming increasingly prominent in the effort to provide assistance to people with disabilities in the Americas. The Trust for the Americas, through its Net Corps Americas (NCA) program, helps support several projects for people with disabilities in Central America.24 The project all involves cooperation with Fidel Assembly in 1999.

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PAHO’s Role in Victim Assistance

In 1999, the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), as a special program of the OAS and the regional office of the World Health Organization (WHO), responded to the need to plan the assistance program. The PAHO team is responsible for coordinating the capacity building in Nicaragua, and the PAHO has developed a survey form carefully and is currently gathering the survey data. They will use the survey results to plan the assistance program.

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