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Stories From Ocotal

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Organization of American States

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Stories from Ocotal

These stories are dedicated to all the people who have contributed, in one way or another, to the removal of mines worldwide and to the mine victims who must make the daily effort to reclaim their lives. Thank you Neyrin, Porfirio and Juan, and may God protect you. —José Ramon Zepeda B

By José Ramon Zepeda B, Administrative Secretary PADCA-OEA

Neyrin Rivera, 13 years old

Neyrin lives in Jalapa, near the Honduras border. This area is one of the most heavily mined regions in Nicaragua. Most of the inhabitants work the land and raise livestock. Neyrin’s parents, Mario Rivera and Maria Matilde Aguilar, work in the field and struggle for a better life day in and day out.

On the morning of April 26, 1994, when he was barely 6 years old, Neyrin was helping relocate the family livestock when the cow he was with stepped on a mine. Neyrin was severely wounded and lay on the ground for almost 6 years old, father waits by the stream for Neyrin to come home to cycle down the steep hill from their one-room house and area is one of the most heavily mined regions in Nicaragua. Neyrin had to be amputated below the knee.

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Porfirio Gómez Zamora, 50 years old

Porfirio is a man who has always tried to improve himself. He was given the opportunity to complete the second year of high school, at the age of 13 he went back to school to study commercial accounting. However, in the 1980s, the economic and political situation in Nicaragua offered few opportunities to better one’s life. So Porfirio, along with two friends named Crescencio and Raúl, planned to immigrate to Honduras, not far from their native town of Jalapa, in order to search for work.

On June 15, 1984, the three friends were traversing a place called Cerro La Jungla when Raúl stepped on a mine. Raúl and Crescencio died instantly. Porfirio was badly injured, losing his right leg above the knee. Since then Porfirio’s life has changed dramatically, as one might expect. Although the economic situation in Nicaragua makes it difficult for anyone to make a living, people with disabilities find it especially hard. Much of their difficulties are imposed by social attitudes as opposed to any physical limitation. "There are many jobs one can do with only one leg," claims Porfirio, "yet no one will hire me, because of my disability."

Today Porfirio is an activist for the mine awareness campaign. He has given radio and television interviews at a local TV station in attempts to educate people about mines and disability awareness. Porfirio also seems to take advantage of every opportunity to further the cause of mine victims. Drawing on his accounting/business background, he has worked out proposals for three income-generating cooperatives for about 30 landmine survivors and their families (a chicken farm, a pig farm and a dairy farm) but has yet to secure the seed money for these small businesses.

Porfirio participated in the Raising the Voices Survivor Advocate Leadership Training Program in Geneva, Switzerland. There, he and seven other survivors from the American region received international humanitarian rights training and participated in the International Meetings of the Mine Ban Treaty. Porfirio will again represent survivors from his region at the Third Meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty that will take place in Managua in September.

PADCA-OAS has helped Porfirio obtain medical and rehabilitative services and provided logistical assistance for other activities to promote his social reintegration.

Juan Ramón López, 42 years old

Juan was born on October 5, 1958 in Mozonte, a village in the province of Nicaragua. He moved to the nearby village of Nueva Segovia. As a young boy Juan worked on coffee farms, cutting and planting the coffee. Of humble circumstances, his family could only afford to send him to school until the third grade. The lack of economic opportunities in his community led Juan to leave home at the age of 16 in search of work.

In 1972, at the age of 14, Juan joined the ranks of the Sandinistas but left them after nine months. He was then captured by Somora’s National Guard. However, he came out of that experience and the accusations against him unpunished. When the Sandinistas triumphed in 1979, they accused Juan of being a traitor to the revolution and he was forced to flee to Honduras. In search of protection in the northern mountains, he had no other choice but to join a contra-revolutionary guerrilla group called MILPAS. After Violeta Chamorro was elected president of Nicaragua in 1990, Juan entered the demobilization program that the Organization of American States (OAS) helped implement.

Although normally practiced, "harassment" is highly dangerous and illegal in Nicaragua. Peaceful deminers do not have the proper training or the equipment to demine within a reasonable margin of safety. In Nicaragua, legal deminers are military personnel, receive expert training, use adequate demining technology, wear protective clothing, receive logistic support, and have ambulances, medical staff and hospital beds standing by to which they have a hospital in case there is an accident. Peaceful deminers often work alone in a field with non-military detectives. They just step carefully and use a knife to pry the armor off the hot sheet of objects. If they do find an object, they may not arrive at it because it is latent and dangerous. Gaussian, legal deminers just cross off a mine by stepping on it and putting it away. But in real life, Juan was not the only person who has managed to get a leg. Juan was a man of great energy with the will to provide a better life for his family and his people. Today Juan is the president of the Council for Indigenous Affairs.
prize of Electric Energy. They were able to maintain and develop cohesion and continue operations with a limited force of 60 men, destroying 18,093 mines, demining 192 targets and clearing a total of 143,878 square meters.

Mine dogs are an integral part of demining operations. C.O.P.

Stage 4: 1996-1999

In July 1995, the Nicaraguan government presented a renewed request for support before the International Community at the United Nations Conference in Geneva. They received positive responses from various governments by way of bilateral agreements and support through the OAS. Countries giving aid via bilateral agreements were Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom and Russia. Norway, Sweden, Holland, Germany, Australia, Argentina, Russia, the United States, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, Japan and Canada all offered support by way of the OAS and IADB. Donor countries offered detection/protection equipment and training, most of which was administered and supervised by the MARMINCA personnel. There were also several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in demining in Nicaragua during Stage 4: the Programa de Barrenderia Ligera with Japan, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Nicaraguan Center for Strategic Studies and the Italian NGO MOVIMONDO.

During this time, the UEDs grew to 400 men that demined 192 targets, destroyed 33,783 mines and cleared 1,142,422 square meters. MARMINCA also began certifying Nicaraguan military personnel to oversee demining operations.

Methods Used in Demining

Nicaragua has used a variety of methods in its demining efforts, beginning with basic equipment such as metal detectors and moving towards mine-detecting dogs and large mechanical mine clearance equipment, to ensure the most effective demining possible. The Nicaraguan Government is currently working out a deal with Japan to get more mechanical clearance machinery and hopes to put them into effect as soon as possible.

Mine awareness and victim assistance programs are integral parts of the National Demining Plan. There has been an ongoing educational campaign focusing on the prevention of mine-related accidents. Fundamental elements of this campaign include the labeling of mine fields, a mass media campaign using television and radio, educational materials and mine awareness training. The National Demining Commission has formed a subcommission, the Subcommission on Education on the Prevention of Mine-Related Accidents, to deal with this aspect of demining directly.

Several NGOs are also involved in mine awareness and victim assistance programs in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Center for Strategic Studies and the Nicaraguan Red Cross both run programs in which they train local people to promote mine awareness and victim assistance. PADCA helps to fund the mine awareness programs presented by the Army, and UNICEF is becoming more involved in both mine awareness and victim assistance efforts in Nicaragua.

Results Thus Far

Although there is still much to do, Nicaragua has had relative success in its demining efforts thus far. UEDs have destroyed 64,874 mines and demined 640 of 991 targets, clearing 32 of the 62 municipalities and almost half of the borderland. They have been able to rehabilitate 2,120,136 square meters of land, benefiting 668,009 people.

Goals for 2001

In the coming year, Nicaragua's demining goals are to:

- Destroy 11,684 planted mines.
- Destroy 45,000 stockpiled anti-personnel mines (aiming to finish destruction of stockpiles in December 2002).
- Employ demining machinery donated by Japan.
- Declare Chisandega, Boaco, Chontales and Region Autónoma del Atlántico Sur mine free.

Challenges

Nicaragua has faced many of the typical challenges of demining operations since the program's inception in 1989. There is the difficulty of locating mines because of inaccurate maps, displacement due to natural processes and disasters, challenging topography, demining accidents, the state of national infrastructure and the lack of necessary funding. But perhaps the biggest challenge of all has been the wake of Hurricane Mitch, which swept across Central America in 1998.

Mitch's torrential rains and the flooding it caused displaced many of the landmine victims still in the ground and scattered debris across mine fields, rendering previous land surveys virtually useless and making the mines even more difficult to find and remove. Flooding and high winds also damaged some of the equipment used in the demining operations, causing further delays. The population at risk from landmines has increased significantly because the mines have been scattered to previously mine-free areas.

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Stories from Ocoatl

A municipality in the southern part of Nicaragua, the Ocoatl municipality, has been affected by landmine victimization. It is said that a victim's family has always fought for the right to a better life for himself and others, and that they are sure that he will continue to fight for the social and economic reintegration of all people with disabilities in Nicaragua.

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