

# Interview with the Nicaraguan Minister of Defense, Dr. José Adán Guerra Pastora

The Minister of Defense stressed that demining operations in his country are purely a humanitarian mission. The ultimate goals are to make the land safe for the communities and its children.

by Margaret S. Busé, Editor

**Margaret Busé (MB):** What are the current plans for the removal of the landmines, particularly, plans to do it safely?

**Dr. José Adán Guerra Pastora:** The tasks of the removal and destruction of AP landmines in our country undergo a rigorous technical process that observes each and every

one of the international standards, which are certified in a timely manner by international supervision. The National Plan for Humanitarian Demining in Nicaragua, besides its national capacities, works with technical and financial support of the OAS, MARMINCA and the IADB, among others.

Assistance in Central America (PADCA-OAS) already has been engaged in actions in this area. On the other hand, the Treaties and Agreements of Cooperation are renewed by adding the experience acquired in the last few years. The technical relationship of coordination among the Nicaraguan Army, PADCA-OAS, the Assistance Mission for the Removal of Mines in Central America (MARMINCA) and the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), experienced its climax, thanks to the work performed *in situ* by the Engineers Corps and the Demining Units of the Army.

**MB:** What are the goals of the Ministry of Defense to eliminate mines?

**Dr. Pastora:** In terms of the destruction of AP mines in storage, they are to be totally eliminated around the year 2002. Currently, there are 66,813 AP mines remaining to be destroyed. On September 17<sup>th</sup> of this year [2001], 20,000 AP mines will be destroyed, at the time of the Third Meeting of the States Party.

In relation to the task of the removal of landmines, in addition to the reformulation of the original plan due to the devastation caused by Hurricane

Mitch, which changed the location of the AP mines from where indicated in the records and maps of the Army, it is estimated that the removal will now be completed in 2004.

In September of this year [2001], we will receive demining equipment that was donated by the people and government of Japan, which will speed up the tasks.

**MB:** What type of mine action assistance could Nicaragua benefit from? (donor funding, victim assistance, etc)

**Dr. Pastora:** Concerning the removal and destruction of AP mines, the National Demining Commission has asked PADCA-OAS to solicit resources from the donors, in order to assure the correct administration and transparency of the process.

Concerning victim assistance, the National Demining Commission, via the Sub-Commission on Medical Attention and Rehabilitation, on one side, and the Sub-Commission on Education, Prevention, Awareness and Reinsertion, on the other, have come to promote actions around technical working groups to diagnose the situation, to identify what is needed to strengthen national capacity and to create a set of projects to present at

the Third Meeting of the States Parties.

The inter-ministerial coordination in the area of demining has been so successful that we are considering the possibility of soliciting greater support and technical and financial strengthening for the National Demining Commission itself.

**MB:** What are the biggest challenges to demining?

**Dr. Pastora:** Definitely, to avoid the occurrence of more accidents and incidents, especially in the civilian population, by reconciling the execution of the National Plan with the emergencies that are going to be caused in the future.

Also, the attention and pursuit of the problems, direct or indirect, that the victims of landmines suffer, in a system that is so limited budgetarily as ours and where the majority of those affected come from rural areas, is no easy task. The task is even more difficult when no infrastructure exists in these areas to begin certain types of projects and when the cultural level of those affected is low.

**MB:** How have natural disasters affected the demining effort in Nicaragua?

**Dr. Pastora:** What we have already referred to, the case of Hurricane Mitch, is a classic case and its occurrence totally disrupted the original National Demining Plan. In our country it is simply impossible to predict when or whether these phenomena will occur.

**MB:** Do you receive requests from the community to de-mine areas of urgent need?

**Dr. Pastora:** Besides the National Plan, that is executed via the Fronts of Operations, which is, by the way,

in proportional terms, one of the largest in the world, there exists a minefield marking and rapid action platoon, prepared to immediately respond to cases of emergency. Even now we are coordinating our efforts with the emergency numbers of the General Director of the Firefighters of the Ministry of the Interior in order to receive such requests for help.

As has taken place in other countries like Angola, Mozambique, and Cambodia, a group of experts analyzes the information and assigns priorities. If modifications to the National Demining Plan are needed in order to give preference to humanitarian aspects, the National Demining Commission would have the last word.

**MB:** Does the affected community understand the minefield marking? What other measures are taken concerning prevention?

**Dr. Pastora:** Unfortunately, the majority of the people of Nicaragua are familiar with the conflict, and many possess some type of military training, and so the minefield markings, particularly those including the skull and cross bones, are easily recognizable to practically all of the population, urban as well as rural.

At the end of April, the National Demining Commission, with the help of PADCA-OAS and UNICEF carried out a workshop entitled "A Single Voice." All of the organizations that in some way contribute to the production of mine awareness material came together in hopes of creating a single guide that all must adhere to voluntarily, and also to recognize the importance of a corporate identity in their endeavors.

**MB:** Do problems exist with non-state actors (criminals, irregular military groups) that utilize mines?

**Dr. Pastora:** At the moment, we do not have any documented cases of this nature.

**MB:** What are some of the objectives of Nicaragua for mine action in the next five years?

**Dr. Pastora:** Concerning the removal and destruction of AP mines, if the flow of technical and financial support remains as consistent as it has until now, and no major natural disasters or other similar incidents occur, then the objectives are: to completely respect the content of the presentation of Article 7 of the Convention that the government made at the time of the Inter-Sessional Work Program, celebrated in the city of Geneva, from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> of May, this year.

Concerning victim assistance, our country requires a great deal of help, because the number of handicapped victims from the conflict is so large, that the capacities of the National Social Security System do not correspond to the real and objective minimum level of necessities that the victims require. In the case of the victims of AP mines, these people cannot and should not be considered a privileged segment of our society or above any other types of disabilities. This creates an enormous dilemma, aside from the macroeconomic capacity of the State. ■

*\*Interview translated by Esteban Nieto for the MAIC.*

*\*Photo courtesy of Desminado Humanitario*

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