

Landmines in Latin America

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History

Following the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980, the Central American country of El Salvador tumbled into a civil war that would run intermittently for 12 years. While the United States reacted to the murder of innocent civilians, and the prospect of radical forces taking power in El Salvador by cutting off aid to the country (and eventually supporting the military government), leftist guerilla groups joined forces to form the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The FMLN's sporadic military successes in the early-1980s, along with the U.S.-backed military government's violent repression of dissenters, brought the plight of El Salvador into the international spotlight. The civil unrest finally came to a halt in January 1992 when the United Nations sponsored a series of talks that led to the signing of the Peace Accords.

Landmine / UXO Overview

The Landmine Monitor Report 1999 estimates that 20,000 landmines remained in the ground at the end of El Salvador's civil war. Some of these mines were laid by the Salvadoran military to protect bases and encampments, although the FMLN laid a majority of the mine total on volcanoes to deter counterinsurgency sweeps. Today, according to Mauricio Granillo Barrera, El Salvador's ambassador to the Organization of American States, the country is mine free. However, officials believe that mines and UXO may still be found in certain remote areas.

Casualties

From January 1994 through mid-1995, 271 Salvadorans were injured by UXO. Of these, 42 were children. While no comprehensive estimates of the total casualties from El Salvador's civil war have been made, it is known that landmines began to take a serious toll on both combatants and civilians in the mid-1980s. Since 1994, no accidents involving landmines have been reported.



Demining

In January 1994, a joint demining effort between the private Belgian firm, International Danger and Disaster Assistance, and former FMLN soldiers and Salvadoran military engineers, was completed. The effort, started in 1993, led to the clearing of 9,511 mines from 425 mine fields. Meanwhile, under a U.N.-administered agreement, representatives from the opposing parties were conducting an extensive mine action program. This program included mine awareness training for over 3,600 teachers, health care personnel and community leaders.

Reality Check

Although El Salvador has been declared "mine free" for some time, it was only in January 1999 that the country requested assistance for its landmine victims. As part of the Joint Program for the Rehabilitation of Mine Victims in Central America, the number of victims and victims' prosthetic, rehabilitation and treatment needs will be addressed by the Pan-American Health Organization. Such an effort was long overdue in a country that counted an estimated 300,000 adolescents and children among the disabled following its 12-year civil war.

Profiles have been compiled from The Landmine Monitor Report, regional MACs, and wire and media reports.
