

Landmines in Latin America



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History

The population of Guatemala, a mountainous country in Central America, has been battered for over three decades by civil unrest. After a coup d'état forced President Jacobo Arbenz from office in 1954, military governments ruled Guatemala for over three decades. During this time, the country's Native American majority (consisting of 60 percent of the population) was subjected to acts of terrorism, displaced from its land and, in about 140,000 instances, murdered. It was only in 1995 that military leaders and leftist guerrillas signed an accord aimed at protecting the rights and lives of Guatemala's Indians.

Landmines/UXO

According to the Landmine Monitor Report 1999, the Guatemalan government claims to have never used landmines during the decades-long period of fighting. However, local military commanders and guerillas of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (Unidad Revolucionara Nacional Guatemalteca) employed various homemade devices throughout the conflict, largely as protective measures. These included hand grenades set to trip wires, directional mines, and other explosive devices made from locally available materials such as plastic tubing and potassium nitrate and sulfur. While original estimates of the number of mines contaminating Guatemala were in the thousands, it is now accepted that only a few hundred mines continue to pose a threat. However, government estimates place the number of pieces of UXO in various border regions, on volcanoes and in mountainous regions between 5,000 and 8,000.



Casualties

There are very few records on landmine casualties in Guatemala. In fact, there were no records kept prior to 1994. Since then, there have been 15 casualties due to landmines and UXO, according to the Association of Volunteer Firefighters. However, officials believe that some casualties may have gone unreported. Guatemala's victim assistance capabilities are also insufficient. Only the army provides assistance to landmine survivors, due in large part to an apparent lack of need. Information can be obtained on health services in Guatemala by obtaining the Center for International Rehabilitation's "Rehabilitation Resource Directory for Central America."

Demining

In November 1997 Guatemala's Executive Coordinating Unit (Unidad Coordinadora Ejecutiva—UCE) established the "National Plan for Demining and the Destruction of UXO." In addition, the Association of Volunteer Firefighters conducts mine action activities that include mine awareness education, mine field location activities, and mine and UXO marking. In December 1998, Inter-American Defense Board (IADB)-trained deminers began clearance activities in the Ixcán department. These activities were completed in January 2000.

Reality Check

With its highly limited distribution of leftover mines and UXO, Guatemala belongs to a small group of affected countries that appears to have its mine situation under control. Also, the country expects to have finished demining its Quiché department by 2002—a sign that Guatemala is taking a proactive approach to its remaining mines and UXO.

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