

Landmines in Latin America



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History

Nicaragua received independence from Spain in 1821. It briefly became part of the Mexican Empire, then later a member of a federation of independent Central American provinces. In 1838 Nicaragua became an independent republic. A fight to control the country pitted the Liberal versus the Conservative party for the rest of the 19th century. In 1909 the United States provided military support for conservatives to reclaim power from the presiding Liberal party. When U.S. forces withdrew in 1925, civil war broke out and U.S. forces returned to keep order. The Liberal party took political control in January 1997 in the first transfer of power from one democratically elected president to another.

Landmine/UXO Overview

According to Nicaragua's Article 7 report, 135,643 mines were laid in the country during the civil conflict, not including an unknown number of other explosive devices. Mines laid from 1982-1989 are reported to be in 465 fields along the border and in 35 of 143 municipalities, representing 37 percent of the nation's population. The total estimates are rough, however, as the Honduran Army cannot count the mines laid by the Contras. In 2000 the army suggested that there is one mine in the ground for every 55 Nicaraguans.



An army report in 1999 stated that 136,813 APLs were stockpiled, of which 40,000 were destroyed by May 2000. The rest of the stockpiled mines are scheduled to be destroyed by April 2002, except for 1,971 mines that will be saved for training purposes. Funding of \$20.8 million (U.S.) was committed by various countries by January 2000 in an effort to meet the total funding needs of \$27 million to complete demining and stockpile destruction by 2004.

Casualties

Although there is no official report of landmine casualties, the Nicaraguan Red Cross estimates that there are 50 injuries per year. Of these casualties, approximately 90 percent are civilians—over half are children or adolescents. The army reported 31 casualties in 1999—11 deaths and 20 injuries. There were another five casualties reported from January to April 2000. However, in 1999 it was determined that the number of casualties had decreased. Victim assistance is supported by various sources, including the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health, which hosts 617 landmine victims for prosthetic care. The "Program for Care to Victims of Mine and UXO" was to

be strengthened in 2000 to continue monitoring the program's services.

Demining

Mine clearance is carried out by the Pequeñas Unidades de Desminada (Small Demining Units) of the Engineer Corps of the Nicaraguan Army, with support from the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB). The 1999 report listed 54,107 destroyed mines from 534 sites, 1.29 sq. km, between 1994 and 1999. Clearance efforts were set back by the destruction caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. After the storm, UNMAS assessed the situation and called for a short-term mine action assistance project that would clear the areas around major bridges and roads. From January to August 1999, Hurricane Mitch emergency teams destroyed 281 mines and cleared 748 sq. m of land. By April 2000 there was a total of 124,187 sq. m cleared. The remaining 81,536 mines in 476 sites should be cleared by 2004.

Reality Check

When Hurricane Mitch ravaged through Central America it caused more damage to Nicaragua than any other country. The hurricane destroyed bridges, buildings and roads, and displaced mines with massive flooding and landslides, causing five civilian mine accidents just after the storm. Afterwards, the reconstruction of infrastructure was complicated by displaced mines, and the Nicaraguan government requested assistance in an emergency demining plan that would coordinate with the reconstruction efforts. The Organization of American States responded with increased foreign donor support and the implantation of emergency demining actions, including mine detecting dogs and more demining units. After much overtime work, Nicaragua's mine clearance plan has now been reevaluated and is set to be completed in 2004.

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