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The OAS and Landmine Victims in Nicaragua

The Organization of American States (OAS) Mine Action Program has established a priority in providing prostheses and medical attention to landmine victims, as well as work training. In 2002, the program started a pilot project that provided job training and jobs to mine victims.

by Carlos Orozco, National Coordinator, OAS Mine Action Program in Nicaragua and Jaime Perales, OAS Communications Specialist

Background

On December 17, 1997, in Nicaragua, Juan Lopez was looking for work on Explosion Mountain. On this day, he stepped on a mine and lost his left leg. He was 29 years old. A year later, the same Mr. Lopez, while he was looking for a small piece of land to work, stepped on a second mine and lost his right leg. Agustín Ramos shared similar circumstances. "I walked into an area where I never imagined mines to be placed." Marlyn Estrada is a survivor as well. "I was seven years old when I lost my two legs, while I was with my grandmother carrying firewood." Jose Larico: "I received shot perforations all over my body." Saima Roya is also a landmine survivor: "[A] friend and I were trying to get a banana from the tree. My friend died and I lost my left leg."

Additional refresher MRE training for a group of ANAMA staff members and mine action NGO's, supported by U.S. European Command (EUCOM) instructors, was conducted in February 2003. The MRE team is going to hold community-based MRE sessions in target districts to build and strengthen community associations.

The OAS Mine Action Rehabilitation Program was created essentially in response to requests from OAS member countries. The effect of one anti-personnel landmine has devastating consequences not only for the victims, but also for their families. Most victims were their family's main economic support before the accident. The lack of knowledge about mines is one of the chief contributing factors to landmine accidents. For instance, Domingo Martinez told the OAS, "I have 10 mines stockpiled at home in a room that no one harm anybody." Says Camilo Rivero, "I had a mine in my patio at home and it exploded without anybody touching it." Anuroo Pouw knew of a similar story. She sold the OAS that "there are some folks in the Pamaps that take out mines and hide them in their homes." Daniel Montiel volunteered to show the OAS mines that are close to a tree. Manuel Perez kept "one mine PPMI SRI and one used rocket LALF" in his home. There are plenty of stories without a name. For example, a 15-year-old youngster found three jumping mines. He kicked them, threw mines at them and moved them close to a road.

Twenty-nine percent of mine accidents happen when people walk through a mined area. Such was the case of Ramon Penala, a 54-year-old farmer. His accident occurred on May 20, 1999. "I was picking corn, I did not know that the field was mined. I stepped on a mine, it exploded and threw me about 30 meters. I was carried to the hospital of Occoci where they amputated both of my legs."

To reduce the risk of accident, the OAS Mine Action Program has embarked on an integral and extensive education campaign in the country. The Repúblico and the OAS have worked on Explosion Mountain. On this day, 34-year-old farmer. His accident occurred which was subsequent to the accident. In Nicaragua, the children are the least affected population with only four percent involved in accidents which is different from other countries with landmines.

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Atlantic Autonomous Region. Work training. stipend, a per diem, transportation and students came from the three different areas started a pilot program providing job training and jobs to mine victims. The selection criteria are diverse. Prior medical and prosthetic assistance is the first requirement. A second criterion includes the distribution of affected zones. The first generation of students came from the three different areas with the most accidents in Nicaragua: Chontales, Nuevo Segovia and the North Atlantic Autonomous Region.

The training period lasts eight months. Of the 24 students who graduated, 11 were trained in woodworking, six in car engineering and mechanics, five in welding and two in computing. In addition, seven students were provided extra help in literacy classes. The OAS Mine Action Program, in collaboration with the National Commission of Demining, a national entity in charge of the follow-up of mine action operations in the country, provided a loan of financial support to each graduated student. This financial support helped them to establish their own businesses in their communities.

During the training, the OAS facilitator noticed that many of the victims had learning disabilities caused in part by depression. In response, the OAS provided psychological treatment to those students. The OAS project has attracted the attention of other NGOs in the United States: Global Action. The scattered munitions and minefields leave arable land unsafe in a region where opportunities for earning off-farm income are scarce. Poor infrastructure means that a trip into town takes a full day of travel. The difficulty of travel isolates people from one another, and the isolation is worsened by the lack of televisions, electricity and newspapers.

by Aurora Bushati, Education Project Officer, UNICEF Albania

Introduction

Albania's mine problem results from the Yugoslavia-Rosso conflict of 1999, when landmines were placed along the 120-km border of Albania and the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, and up to one km inside of Albania. During and since the conflict, 48 people have been killed and 576 injured by landmines and UXO incidents.

Four years after the conflict, parts of Albania's northern border continue to be contaminated with mines and UXO, which are hindering the lives of people in 39 villages of three poor, isolated and mountainous districts: Kukes, Has and Tropojë. The scattered munitions and minefields have arable land unsafe in a region where opportunities for earning off-farm income are scarce. Poor infrastructure means that a trip into town takes a full day of travel. The difficulty of travel isolates people from one another, and the isolation is worsened by the lack of televisions, electricity and newspapers.

During and Immediately After the War

Almost half a million refugees from Kosovo fled into Albania during the conflict in March 1999, and they stayed there for five months. Spontaneous civil mobilization and substantial resources from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO's) member states prevented a humanitarian disaster. But the psychological trauma of the war and the disruption of normal childhood had an enormous impact on the young. Based on its human rights approach to working with children, one of UNICEF’s responses was the creation of Child-Friendly Spaces, which provided some schooling, a safe play space, and creative activities that distracted children from the reality of their situation and helped them deal with their fears.

As the lead UN agency for mine awareness, UNICEF had a major role to play in warning both indigenous Albanians and refugees about the risk of mines and UXO. The UNICEF multimedia mine awareness campaign included extensive publicity through posters and leaflets at transit points, in refugee camps, at turnstiles and on the front lines, as well as broadcasts of messages on radio and television. To deal with uncertain electricity supplies, the campaign also included distribution of wind-up radios to vulnerable refugees. The campaign included:

1. A national mine awareness campaign, launched in July 1999, with the participation of the president and the ministers of Education, Defense and Culture.
2. A week of anti-mine activity in September 1999, at the end of which, the Albanian Parliament pledged to ratify the Ottawa Treaty banning landmines. It did so in 2000.
3. In collaboration with the Ministry of Defense, deployment of 7,000 mine-mapping signs along the border.

• Mine awareness training of educators for local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), refugee community leaders and members of Albanian and Kosovar Youth Councils.

Mine awareness is difficult during a conflict—but it is equally difficult to maintain people’s vigilance when the conflict is over and life has begun returning to normal. UNICEF performed this work in collaboration with the ministries of Defense and Education as well as the Albanian Mine Action Executive, Albanian Youth Council, Balkan Sudafoders, the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) and several local NGOs.

During 2000, initial steps were taken to incorporate mine awareness into the primary school curriculum—in every subject, from music and drama to history and mathematics. The methodology was highly participatory to encourage young people themselves to become disseminators of the information. UNICEF also supported the training of 100 teachers and trainers of trainers. The Ministry of Education and Science helped to produce two manuals, one for teachers and one for students. A recent agreement has been made with the Ministry to revise and publish these manuals.

Interventions During 2001-2003

A landmine injury can mean a loss of a limb or a missing finger, and it can mean loss of a child's life. Many years of displacement and poverty have left communities in Albania with no resources to clean up the land, and the initial efforts in Kosovo and Albania have faced many challenges and obstacles. The next step is the national awareness campaign with the media and the local communities. The campaign will educate people about the risks and consequences of landmines and UXO, and it will help to prevent further injuries and fatalities.


The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has been instrumental in helping Albania address its mine action problems. The following article discusses what steps UNICEF—as well as other mine action organizations within Albania—has taken during and after the conflicts in 1999 to help offset landmine concerns of both victims and the general Albanian population.

Contact Information

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