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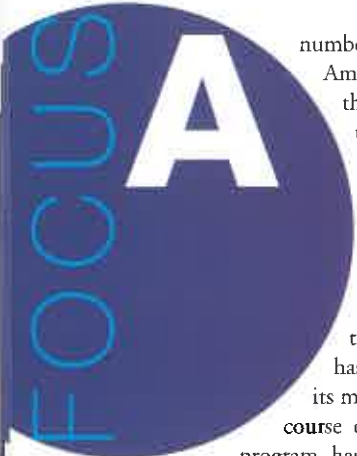
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Over a Decade of OAS Mine Action

by Juan Carlos Ruan [Organization of American States Mine Action]



A number of countries in the Americas have lived with the legacy of landmines that (at times) remains from decade-old conflicts. The Organization of American States (OAS) has been at the forefront in alleviating the negative effects this weapon has on communities in its member states. Over the course of 15 years, the OAS program has evolved significantly to better react to the needs of mine-affected communities. This evolution, and the adoption of a collaborative civil-military structure, has ensured the OAS remains an effective and efficient means to provide assistance in all facets of mine action.

OAS Mine Action: A Brief History

In 1991, the OAS created the Assistance Program for Demining in Central America (PADCA for its name in Spanish). This program began as an exclusively technical demining operation composed of programs to strengthen national capacity by training and equipping national military personnel to locate and clear minefields. Because demining activities were generally considered a military responsibility by national authorities, the military was the sole entity involved in most demining activities. National armed forces also carried out limited mine risk education (MRE) campaigns in areas of operation.

Clearing vegetation from a minefield in Nicaragua, 1993.

As the program matured, it became apparent that a more integrated approach was necessary to truly alleviate the complex effects of landmines. Consequently, the Program for Comprehensive Action Against Anti-personnel Mines (AICMA for its name in Spanish) was established, incorporating the PADCA program and establishing a holistic approach to assist countries. This program addresses not only the area of humanitarian demining but also other areas such as MRE, victim assistance and supporting OAS member-state compliance with the Ottawa Convention.

The first demining operations were executed without the benefit of international or national doctrine on carrying out humanitarian demining. Over the years, the lessons learned in mine action began to be formalized in the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). These standards have since been written and rewritten as new knowledge on best practices was accumulated. Today, demining operations are carried out under these IMAS, providing a structured methodology for executing mine clearance activities and establishing a method of quality control.

Demining operations have expanded significantly in terms of the number of countries assisted and the techniques used. Since its establishment in Central America, the AICMA program has developed active services throughout South America. The program has also assisted a number of countries with technical knowledge and funding in the area of stockpile destruction, as well as in other areas of mine action. One of the most recent endeavors carried out by AICMA was a mission in Suriname that consisted of transporting a group of Honduran soldiers to assist in clearing the last remaining minefield and to train

a unit of Surinamese soldiers in carrying out humanitarian demining.

While the manual demining technique has been the most prevalent method of clearing minefields because of the geographic and climatological characteristics of the areas where mines are most frequently found, canine and heavy equipment demining methods were later introduced in areas conducive to using these methods. In specific situations, the use of these techniques has increased the efficiency, speed and safety of clearance operations.

While the military continues to carry out nearly all demining operations in the Americas, civilian organizations have taken the lead in areas such as MRE and victim assistance. Civilian organizations have often proven to be more appropriate for the execution of many mine action tasks, especially for operations in areas of past conflict where the national military's contribution may not be viewed positively by all parties. In practice, however, MRE can often play a role in rebuilding trust between groups that previously stood on opposite sides of a conflict. In Guatemala, for example, MRE and survey operations are carried out by teams of reintegrated former insurgents and volunteer firemen, while military personnel handle UXO and mine clearance tasks. This collaboration has not only allowed inhabitants of mine-affected areas to trust people of whom they were previously suspicious, but also has built a camaraderie and confidence between formerly opposing combatants.

When the OAS began participating in MRE, activities were unstructured and carried out without a national plan to guide activities, which caused considerable confusion and doubling of efforts between organizations. At times, the information distributed by one organization was often inconsistent with the information diffused by other organizations. The discrepancies highlighted the need for a more structured and coordinated approach and for national standards to be established. In Nicaragua, for example, the establishment of the National Demining Commission was central to the development of national MRE guidelines. This coordination at the national level has ensured that messages are consistent and that activities are executed as efficiently as possible. Organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) became heavily involved in MRE activities and collaborated with the OAS on a number of projects. Other organizations, such as the Red Cross, also began coordinating their activities with the OAS.

Lessons Learned

One of the principal lessons learned in providing MRE was the importance of seeking the active



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUAN CARLOS RUAN

participation of inhabitants of mine-affected communities as well as landmine survivors. In Central and South America, where many of the minefields were recorded with varying degrees of accuracy and detail (many not having been documented at all), inhabitants of mine-affected communities have become the main source of information for identifying mined areas. In order to take advantage of this resource, the AICMA program carries out active MRE campaigns that serve both to warn inhabitants about the dangers of landmines and to seek information on minefield locations. Campaigns are carried out through community meetings, door-to-door visits, school visits, and radio and television programs, all of which have ensured the active participation of community leaders, teachers and students, who continually act as channels for important information regarding landmines and UXO.

Community participation is essential to establish the content of didactic materials to be used in campaigns and is also the best method for distributing the materials. Educational materials need to be area-specific in terms of language and types of behavior addressed and must take into consideration all of the idiosyncrasies of the areas. Without community involvement, the material risks become useless and even counterproductive. The OAS has permanently employed landmine survivors who have proven to be the best people to impart this message. Landmine survivors are able to educate inhabitants through firsthand experience and illustrate the damage that these weapons cause.

Victim Assistance

In terms of victim assistance, the OAS began its first efforts in Nicaragua in 1997, before the signing of the Ottawa Convention. Although national programs to provide assistance to landmine survivors exist in a number of countries, many survivors have no knowledge of the assistance to which they are entitled and the availability of support through organizations such as the OAS. Through the MRE activities highlighted above, the OAS has been able to identify survivors who stand to benefit from the program for physical and psychological rehabilitation offered by the OAS and advise them of different programs available to them.

Since the establishment of victim assistance programs, the OAS has been working with landmine survivors, focusing on rebuilding their lives and gaining back the self-confidence they once had. While each landmine survivor is unique, they share a number of similarities throughout the region. Survivors are typically from rural areas, have dedicated their lives to agricultural activities and lack disability assistance as well as other forms of social safety nets. Unfortunately, the physical strength necessary to carry out agricultural activities is often overwhelming for survivors who have experienced limb loss. Realizing the diverse needs of survivors, the OAS sought to

develop a program that offered much more than just prosthetic devices. Consequently, the OAS established a program that includes psychological assistance, provision of prostheses, job training, and work placement, as well as follow-up financial and medical assistance.

During AICMA's victim assistance activities, it became apparent that landmine survivors have a number of needs. Psychological assistance has been recognized as a critical component of the program, accomplished by addressing the survivor's post-traumatic stress as well as through job training and placement, which serve to remind them that they are capable human beings with skills to offer their community. Many landmine survivors who have been interviewed have said

assistance it offers. For years now, it has warned hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of the threat of landmines, cleared hundreds of minefields and returned the much-needed "mine-free" land to inhabitants. Additionally, the program has assisted mine victims in every step of their rehabilitation and assisted countries in the destruction of their stockpiled mines and in complying with their obligations stated in the Ottawa Convention. Although the goal of the OAS—a "mine free"²² hemisphere—is an achievable one, there is still a long road ahead. It is important to point out that while the regional approach to mine action has provided a number of benefits to the OAS member states, it is the national will and support that has made these programs flourish



The Inter-American Defense Board visits a minefield in a Nicaraguan border area, 1993.

that the condition in which they found themselves before the program located them was dismal and that they went as far as contemplating suicide. Today, many have started their own micro-enterprises with the full support of the program, returning a sense of dignity to their lives, their families and their communities. Additionally, many of the survivors who have successfully completed the program have gone on to mentor other survivors. This mentoring has been well-received and has helped survivors deal with their "new reality." The evolution of the program and the lessons learned have ensured that the OAS continues providing the most effective response for landmine survivors, training them in areas that will truly have a positive impact on their lives.

Conclusion

The OAS program has expanded in the number of countries it assists and the kind of

and has optimized results. The countries of the Americas have committed themselves to eradicating damage caused by landmines. The OAS has been standing by to support any of the member states in their activities and is always looking forward to providing further assistance. ♦

See "References and Endnotes" on page 104

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