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THE BENEFITS OF A Regional Approach to Mine Action

by Dr. Suzanne L. Fiederlein [Project Manager, Mine Action Information Center]



For well over a decade, landmine clearance has figured prominently in the post-conflict reconstruction and national reconciliation processes in Latin America. During armed conflicts in Central America in the 1970s–80s, combatants on both sides used anti-personnel landmines. As the conflicts drew to a close and peace agreements were negotiated, the removal of landmines emerged as both an agenda item in negotiations and an obstacle to address in the post-conflict reconstruction phase. El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua all commenced landmine clearance efforts in individualized ways based on the context of their national conflicts.

As the mine-ban movement gathered steam in the 1990s and international clearance efforts became more sophisticated, mine action developed a distinctive regional character that reflected the interests of the countries in Central America to build lasting peace and support for democratic governance. The Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) played central roles in shaping and supporting the regional mine action programs.

A hallmark of the OAS/IADB program is the use of international supervisors and monitors drawn from various Latin American countries. They oversee the work of the national militaries that conduct mine clearance, all with IADB technical assistance and overall program coordination and donor funding managed by the OAS. This interaction among military personnel, along with regular opportunities for communication among governmental representatives (and civil society to a certain extent), has laid the groundwork for a strong regional movement to create a “mine free”¹ hemisphere.²

Mine clearance efforts first began in Nicaragua as the internal conflict between the *Sandinista* government and the *Contras* wound down in 1990. The Nicaraguan government quickly recognized the importance of mine clearance to reconstruction efforts. If peace was going to last and the country rebuild so that its citizens could have hope of a better future, then the extensive landmine contamination had to be eliminated. The *Sandinista* army initially tried to conduct

clearance on its own but eventually sought assistance from the OAS and the IADB.³ Logistical and financial challenges hampered the early efforts, but by 1995–96 the OAS’ Program of Assistance to Demining in Central America (PADCA), combined with technical assistance provided by the IADB (through MARMINCA—the Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in Central America), began to produce substantial results not only in Nicaragua, but in the neighboring countries of Honduras and Costa Rica, which also suffered landmine contamination due to the *Contra-Sandinista* war.

In 1998, the OAS/IADB programs were extended to Guatemala. Guatemala represents a special case for the OAS/IADB program because its munitions contamination is primarily one of UXO rather than landmines. It also is different in that munitions clearance was addressed in its peace accords and a distinct domestic approach to



Representatives of Guatemala’s Demining Commission, CVB, demobilized URNG, and Executive Coordination Unit share lessons learned from their demining operations, demonstrating how coordination among such diverse groups leads to more effective mine action programs.

mine action was created to meet the requirements of its particular post-conflict situation.

In order to clear contaminated land so that the displaced population could be resettled, Guatemala devised a unique arrangement in which its Volunteer Fireman’s Corps (CVB) was asked to serve as a neutral actor in the clearance program and as a liaison between government authorities and a population reluctant to trust the military and cooperate with it in providing information needed to conduct clearance. The program also included the demobilized Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity guerrillas as a constituent partner, and thus provided a framework through which the demobilized guerrillas, the military, and the CVB could build trust among one another and in their interactions with the population.⁴

By 2005, the OAS/IADB-supported clearance programs in Central America could list Costa

Rica and Honduras as “mine free,” joining El Salvador, which was declared “mine free” after the completion of its clearance program initiated shortly after the signing of peace accords in 1992.⁵ With Guatemala and Nicaragua slated to join their neighbors within the next two years, Central America is on track to become the first “mine free” region in the world.

In the last five years, structures and programs developed for Central America have gradually been extended to landmine-contaminated areas left behind by conflicts and national security concerns in Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Chile and Suriname. Mine action remains most problematic in Colombia, where an ongoing internal conflict poses substantial barriers to launching humanitarian mine clearance. The OAS and IADB have been working with the Colombian government to provide support and technical advice for the country’s mine action program since 2003. In February 2005, they hosted, in conjunction with the government of Colombia, the International Seminar on Humanitarian Demining in Cartagena, Colombia. This seminar brought together personnel from throughout Latin America to share their knowledge and experiences in mine clearance. This event illustrated the considerable expertise garnered by the mine action community in the region and the great extent to which the participants interact and exchange information.

The OAS/IADB mine action programs contain confidence-building components and multilateral assistance agreements that have drawn the countries of the Americas together in new and more creative ways. By focusing on a concrete problem widely acknowledged as an unacceptable threat to the citizens of those countries, governments, military forces and former combatants have demonstrated the desire and ability to work together to achieve the goal of creating a region free from the scourge of anti-personnel landmines. In the process they also have created new channels of communication, both domestically and transnationally, and improved regional coordination and cooperation. ♦

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