



by Laura DeYoung, Mine Action Information Center

Colombia is the only country in Latin America where landmines are still being emplaced, and it is also considered the country most affected by landmines in the Western Hemisphere. The severity of the landmine problem in Colombia is a result of the ongoing 40-year internal conflict among armed rebel groups. Illegal armed groups are responsible for placing over 80,000 mines in Colombia's rural areas. Of Colombia's 1,119 municipalities, one out of two is affected by mines across 31 of its 32 departments; essentially, half of the country's territory is affected. According to a 2005 fact sheet released by the Office of the Vice Presidency's Anti-personnel Mines Observatory, Colombia is the fourth most mine-contaminated country in the world.¹ On average, landmines kill about two people each day in the country. Government statistics show the total number of casualties from landmines to be 3,025 between January 1990 and August 2004. This number is not exact due to considerable underreporting. At least 37 percent of all reported victims are civilians and 39 percent of those are children. Social, political and economic development are all affected by the presence of mines.

In the past few years, Colombia has finally started to make its first tentative steps toward peace. In June 2004, the Colombian government permitted an incarcerated rebel leader to leave his prison cell for a few hours to make a declaration on behalf of his group at a forum on landmines organized by Geneva Call—an international humanitarian organization dedicated to engaging armed non-state actors (NSAs) to respect and to adhere to humanitarian norms—in collaboration with the Colombian Campaign Against Mines. The governor of Antioquia, one of the most heavily mined regions in the country, took the initiative to create a Humanitarian Commission. The commission's intent is to find regional solutions to suffering caused by conflict. Working with Geneva Call, it negotiated agreements with rebel groups to demine high-impact civilian areas such as water sources, schools and farming areas. Homicides, massacres, kidnappings and acts of terrorism have decreased since 2002, and coca and poppy (used to manufacture illicit drugs) cultivation has gone down by as much as 33 percent since 2001.² Despite these few positive steps forward, however, the people of Colombia continue to live in an environment plagued by conflict, terrorism and in particular, landmines.

Challenges to Demining Progress

Armed rebel groups. As expressed by Queen Noor, former queen of Jordan, "What makes Colombia's landmines problem so acute is these non-government forces are not mapping where they place the landmines, leaving people vulnerable for generations to come. The way the mines are being laid, it seems like there's a total lack of humanity and any kind of human responsibility."¹ The largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) consists of 20,000 armed men, women and children. FARC uses landmines to protect its camps and hideouts and prevent civilians from using the country's roads to get to public authorities. Because of this mine usage, the government is unable to recapture the land. "Conflict is still active and the government does not control all—or even most—of its own territory," says Eric M. Filippino, Head of the Socio-Economic Unit of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD). The National Liberation Army (ELN) is another guerrilla group with less than 5,000 members. According to the United States Department of State, the ELN is a Marxist insurgent group formed in 1965 by



urban intellectuals inspired by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. This group kidnaps hundreds of people every year; foreign employees of major corporations are often targeted. The ELN collects revenue from taxation of illegal narcotics and also assaults energy infrastructure. Both groups accumulate millions of dollars through kidnappings and illegal drug trade activities.

The inventiveness of guerrilla groups like those mentioned above impedes the progress of mine action in Colombia. Maj. German Perdomo, head of a mine detection program near Bogotá, reports that rebels use mines without metal so they are undetectable. Emerson Forigua, a specialist on mines in the Colombian Defense Ministry, reports that the guerrilla groups mix coffee with the explosives to confuse bomb-sniffing dogs. Mines are placed along rural roads and school grounds, intentionally targeting children. The groups also mine property left behind by displaced citizens. When the people return home, they often find their land turned into a minefield and are forced to leave again.

Lack of humanitarian demining. Humanitarian demining programs are not being developed in Colombia because of the present ongoing armed conflict. Without these programs, communities living in mine-affected areas are at greater risk of getting injured. Colombia is one of the only countries heavily affected by mines that does not receive much help from international donors. Mine risk education (MRE) is the only current mine action activity due to the ongoing conflict and geographic and political constraints.

Lack of victim assistance. Victims disabled by mines struggle to find jobs and often suffer from psychological problems. Because most Colombians live in rural communities and medical centers are in urban areas, access to treatment is extremely difficult. Transportation to medical centers may take six to 24 hours and victims often die during the long trip. Medical treatment is slow, and rural survivors lack the resources needed for transportation, lodging and meals. By interviewing mine survivors, researchers for the *Landmine Monitor Report* discovered that it took an average of 12 hours for the interviewees to reach a hospital, and some survivors were sent home without prostheses or rehabilitation after amputations. Others paid for free treatment that they were entitled to under law and did not receive any benefits or assistance following initial treatment.

Successes of Mine Action

Legislative action against landmines. The Colombian government is committed to the advancement of mine action in Colombia. On

March 1, 2001, the country joined the Ottawa Convention, which prohibits the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel mines and is an important resource for landmine destruction. Under the Ottawa Convention, Colombia agreed to destroy all of its stockpiled mines within four years (by March 1, 2005), clear minefields within 10 years, assist the economic and social rehabilitation of mine survivors and victims, and report each year on the progress made in fulfilling these commitments. On October 24, 2004, Colombia fulfilled part of its obligation to the Ottawa Convention by destroying its 6,800 remaining stockpiled mines. The government has said it is committed to banning victim-activated mines completely and is replacing them with command-activated explosive devices, which can be manually triggered by a soldier after evaluating the threat.

The National Congress approved Colombia's Law 759 on June 20, 2002. Under this law, individuals convicted of landmine use face penal sanctions between 10 and 15 years, a fine between 500 and 1,000 times the country's official minimum monthly salary, and prohibition from public office for a period of five to 10 years.

Implementation of programs. The government implemented the Program for Mine Accident Prevention and Victim Assistance in 2001 to help survivor assistance. The program includes medical care and rehabilitation, educational reintegration, vocational reintegration and accessibility to the physical environment.

A Mine Action Portfolio country team promotes coordination within the mine action community, including U.N. agencies, the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The National Mine Action Plan 2002–2006 was coordinated by the national Anti-personnel Mines Observatory, which is part of the Presidential Program for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law. The Observatory is in charge of coordinating the integrated mine action in the country and facilitating political decision-making. The Observatory is also in charge of permitting the accreditation and standardization of actions in order to prioritize, organize and optimize the activities relative to mines, as well as national resources and cooperation.

Logistical support. In 1997, the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) was implemented in Colombia. IMSMA is an information management system that improves capabilities for decision-making, coordination and information policy related to humanitarian demining. Because Colombia lacks the proper technical abilities to combat mines, the GICHD lends technical assistance by supporting the system. The organization provides "IT support of the IMSMA system," and "training on MRE, strategic planning, and needs assessment," Filippino says.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) provides public information on MRE, education and training on the rights of landmine

survivors, and community liaison activities. UNICEF has worked with the ELN to promote the guerrilla group's commitment to a ban on mines. In a letter to Geneva Call the ELN announced that it was ready to clear its own anti-personnel mines in certain areas under its influence. The Organization of American States also helps Colombia with MRE, victim assistance and mine action database development.

United for Colombia, formed in 2003, has established a support network within the Colombian-American community and among U.S. citizens to provide specialized assistance to seriously disabled Colombians. United for Colombia has covered the medical cost for rehabilitation treatment of seven patients in Colombia. The organization "has also given presentations describing the situation of the war victims in Colombia, with the goal of seeking holistic rehabilitation alternatives for these victims," says Claudia Estrada, secretary of the Embassy of Colombia in Washington, D.C. The organization is also promoting the training of medical personnel in Colombia.

The Future of Colombian Mine Action

The mines currently being laid by guerrilla groups will continue to affect future generations. Even though the ELN agreed to decrease its use of mines, until the rebel groups stop fighting, mine action assistance in Colombia will not progress. Although non-governmental organizations and the government are taking steps towards a mine-safe country, "the mine action programme has many constraints to its operations and there is much work still to be done," Filippino says. ♦

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