

# Beyond Mine Removal

## Overview

For over a decade, the Organization of American States (OAS) has been coordinating landmine removal operations throughout the Americas. The program has been the responsibility of the Mine Action Program of the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy of the OAS, which provides overall coordination and management. The OAS has been successful with the technical assistance of the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), the hard work of the national armies and the generosity of international donors. While the national armies of mine-affected countries carry out the actual demining in the field, the IADB provides a team of international supervisors and military trainers that comprise the Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in Central America (MARMINCA) and most recently, the Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in South America (MARMINAS). It is generally agreed that the activities and accomplishments of this coordinated effort have gone well beyond demining. Today, the program stands as a testament of regional cooperation and has contributed to the overall improvement of relationships between and within participating countries.

## Regional Cooperation

Currently, the OAS and IADB are supporting the demining operations of five countries: Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Peru. While the OAS ensures that host-nation demining units are well-equipped with safety equipment, mine detectors, etc., international supervisors monitor the operations, ensuring that the methods and procedures used in these operations conform to international standards and proper safety measures. The IADB international supervisor teams are composed of military officers from IADB member nations. This was developed as a form of in-kind assistance at no cost to the program or beneficiary states. Currently, officers from Bolivia, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Venezuela,



*A sapper clears a path under the supervision of the Squad Commander.*

Nicaragua, Honduras and Brazil serve in this capacity. As of July 2004, this joint effort by the different entities—national army, OAS and IADB—had led to the removal of over 30,000 landmines and UXO from their national territories, which has contributed to the decline in the number of landmine victims. Apart from the obvious benefits of the landmine removal program, there have also been other tangible and intangible confidence and security benefits at the national as well as international level.

### Civil-Military Benefits

At the national level, demining operations build trust between individuals in mine-affected communities and government authorities. With the immediate threat of injury landmines pose to affected communities and the obstacles to the productive use of fertile land, agrarian communities have often opted to remove the landmines themselves in order to produce the crops necessary to feed their families. The work of the national armies in removing this threat and returning landmine-free land to the people of affected communities is a measure that improves civil-military relationships that may have been damaged due to past conflicts. In Guatemala, for example, the volunteer firemen corps, ex-Guatemala National Revolutionary Union (URNG) guerrillas and the national army play crucial roles in mine action. Before landmine removal operations begin, a team composed of the volunteer firemen and ex-URNG visits the communities to provide mine risk education and inform the community about the military presence and the work they are about to undertake to remove the threat of landmines from the community. This union provides an excellent example of civil-military cooperation and assists in the development of a good relationship between the local communities and the national army, allowing demining operations to continue unfettered. As Colonel (U.S. Army, Retired) Carl E. Case, Senior Specialist of the OAS Mine Action Program, comments, "The campaign also introduces both the deminers and the international supervisor to people in the area of operations, enhancing civil-military communications at the local level. This process produces a more supportive environment for the deminers, opening another source of information about mine and minefield loca-



*Stockpile destruction*

tions." Additionally, the demining projects allow for development projects and humanitarian efforts to be carried out by international and national organizations without the threat of landmines, thus contributing another benefit to the future of the community.

### Confidence and Security-Building Measures

The work of the national armies, as well as the work of the international supervisors, contributes to the peace and security of the region as the different countries cooperate with each other to reach a common goal. The demining project has opened another avenue for dialogue between nations that were once opposed to possibilities of collaboration. This case is true for the relationships between Honduras and Nicaragua and between Peru and Ecuador. In both of these cases, mines affect common border areas. Collaboration on border mine clearance, information exchange, as well as their participation in regional seminars and other fora, has often led to further collaboration between neighboring countries. Peru and Ecuador, for example, despite previous border disputes and conflicts, are now carrying out humanitarian demining operations on their borders, which has opened the ground for cross-border development initiatives to take place. The removal of landmines also represents an ideological shift between the two countries to adopt more peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms. This common goal has built trust between the militaries whose transparency through information exchange on landmine issues is key to successful demining operations.

The international supervisors, as a regional team with a common goal, enhance the sol-

idity of the region in humanitarian affairs and serve as an example for other initiatives on issues such as natural disasters. Having foreign military officers monitor the work of national armies contributes to military-to-military interactions that may be useful as possibilities for further collaboration emerge. As Colonel Charles Rowcliffe (U.S. Army), head of demining at the IADB, mentions, "The international supervisors are truly unique in that officers from different countries work together and are often subordinate to officers from neighboring countries. Their activities and cooperation serve to improve relationships between participating countries and often facilitate military-to-military interaction in other areas."

The military contribution to demining, as a confidence and security-building mechanism, is an important advantage of the program. Unfortunately, this benefit is often intangible and may go unrecognized by the mine action community. This kind of interaction among the militaries of the region could most likely be replicated elsewhere with the same benefits. In fact, other regions may benefit more from this sort of cooperation as they seek to reconsolidate trust and security among their neighbors. Within the Americas, regional cooperation has assisted the hemisphere in closing in on its goal of becoming a mine-free hemisphere as the national military destroyed thousands of mines. The civil-military interaction of the program over the years has also demonstrated the benefit of this collaboration at a national and international level. The successes and accomplishments of the OAS program could not be reached without the active participation of the armed forces of mine-affected countries as well as the armed forces of those countries that are not affected by landmines.

*\* Photos clo author.*

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