

UNSUNG HEROES

in Latin America

Porfirio Gomez, Nicaragua

Mr. Porfirio Gomez is a Mine Awareness Expert in Nicaragua. Though he suffers the loss of one leg, he traverses rivers and treads through mountains and varying climactic conditions to reach isolated villages and warn them of the threat of landmines.

Gomez's incapacitation has had an inseparable impact on the nature of his involvement in mine action. "Thinking about the moral support of the survivors of mine accidents is something that I can do," says Gomez. Consequently, Gomez helps fulfill a need in Nicaragua that, he notes, has often been disregarded as unimportant.

Gomez explains that at the end of civil conflict in Nicaragua, the provisional government adopted a law that stated that victims of war no longer existed. However, they did not remove the mines that they planted in the cultivation fields. When farmers returned to work their parcels of land, they encountered a hidden enemy. Mines began to mutilate civilians. Says Gomez, "Absolutely no one attended to the victims: not the government, not any institution."

Gomez remembers, on one occasion, a functionary worker of the Program of Assistance for Demining in Central America (PADCA) arrived in Jalapa and asked the local government to help him compile a list of mine victims. He left dissatisfied, as the local government did not wish to receive him. They told him that they knew of some who had lost limbs due to mine accidents, but if he desired to know them, he would have to go find where they lived on his own. Several of the victims didn't even have prostheses.

On another occasion, Gomez decided to accompany survivors to The Government of Nicaragua Social Security and Welfare Institution

In the Words of Porfirio Gomez

Q: What has been your experience with demining and the people affected by mines, and how has it molded you as an individual?

A: The incident that impacted me the most as an individual was the story of two children in the community of Matagalpa. Their father had transferred PMN mines to the location of the shore, near the edge of their house. One day, the girls went to cut a broom in order to sweep the house. One of them stepped on a mine and was mortally wounded. The girl was able to get herself to the door of the house, exclaiming, "Mama, help me, I am dying!" This is what the surviving sister told me.

Another incident that stands out occurred when I was educating a community in the municipal of Jalapa on the dangers of landmines. Immediately, the owner of the house told me that I should come with her. She had mines underneath her bed and under the beds of her children. Then, there is the story of Señora Agapito of the community of Las Pampas who, with her tearful eyes, told us of the death of her son who was an untrained deminer. Other experiences that remain with me are those of the children who are mutilated by landmines. I will never forget them and how they began to live again with the physical transformation that they suffer. Bound by extreme poverty, they lack opportunities that should be available for incapacitated people.

Because I am an incapacitated person, I can help other people who suffer from incapacitation. Perhaps, on a large scale, my experiences in mine action have pressed me to focus on eliminating mine accidents with children and adults in cultivation fields, where the system of life is difficult because of the poverty that they live in.

Q: Where do you see mine action in 10 or 20 years and where do you fit into that vision?

A: While in 20 years Nicaragua will no longer have these artifacts of death in its communities, I believe that we will have a persistent danger in the streams and the rivers. Currents,



Porfirio Gomez, right.

by Jennette Townsend, MAIC

provoked by Hurricane Mitch, have been dragging the mines down rivers and streams. There will also be the risk of mines that were removed from the minefields by untrained deminers—mines that have been moved to unknown locations.

With regard to the victims of landmines, they receive medical assistance, rehabilitation and social re-emersion through PADCA. Without this assistance, I think that they would remain alone, without anyone to help them with their chronic injuries.

In 20 years, I will be much older, but my moral fortitude will be alive and young and I will continue fighting while I am alive. In the Americas, there are beautiful countries that will suffer the scourge of mines. If the experience that I have acquired in this program of prevention will serve the communities of any country in America, or anyone attempting to prevent mine accidents, I am at their service.

Q: If money and other obstacles weren't a problem, what would you do with the mine problem?

A: Money and other obstacles are problems that would not overcome the problem 100 percent. But if money was not an obstacle, we could contact community organizations, community leaders, religious and professional groups to solicit their support in order to tackle the problems related to landmines. Forums could be initiated, in which members of communities could be made aware of the mine problem. In this manner, we would have positive results—there would be no more accidents among the habitants of communities.

Q: What kinds of things can be done to improve the world of demining?

A: As confirmed by the experience that I have acquired in the prevention campaign, I believe that education is critical. Among the population, education serves as a source of information—information that helps denounce reports that the landmines were removed from the minefields by original settlers or by hurricane Mitch.

I believe that it is important to make people realize that they are involved in mine action worldwide and that it is important to exchange experiences. In this way we can strengthen the fight in our own countries and improve elements of our own campaigns against landmines. For example, in the prevention campaign in Nicaragua we fight against the handling and transferring of mines to the homes of untrained deminers. This campaign is what drives and directs the PADCA, with excellent results. The program provides an example for other countries where mines are planted in cultivation fields—they may also reduce the number of accidents to zero.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the importance of the support of international organizations in the worldwide demining effort. It is important that they don't forget the victims of mines—that they pursue labor reinstatement for mine victims so that they feel useful to their families and to society.

(INSSBI), with the intent of soliciting prostheses or a small pension. Many of the mine accident survivors that Gomez knew were from extremely poor communities and were hesitant to solicit help on their own from institutions. As it turned out, their efforts were in vain; they were told that INSSBI did not cover people involved in mine accidents. This enraged Gomez and he resolved to get more involved in the support of landmines victims.

One day, Gomez met a man who he describes as an “exceptionally humane person who was involved in the total fight against mines.” His name was Carlos Orozco, the national coordinator of PADCA. He told Gomez what had been imparted to him in talks about mine risk education (MRE) in high-risk zones. The subject interested Gomez as he had read some literature on mines.

Señor Orozco asked Gomez to participate in stockpile mine destruction activities. Gomez began this endeavor on a volunteer basis by providing MRE for people who lived in high-risk areas. PADCA only covered traveling expenses for the days when he went to visit communities affected by mines. He presented in the schools and in the cultivation fields where the habitants lived.

Later, Orozco assigned Gomez a stipend and he enlarged his work by visiting house-to-house in all of the high-risk communities. Says Gomez, “Thanks to the unconditional support of Señor Orozco, the prevention campaign was enhanced each day, and to date I am proud to be a promoter of the campaign—to make a safe way without mines.”

the students and also organizing children and leaders so that they also could carry the message of mine prevention.

Q: What has been your experience with demining and the people affected by mines and how has it molded you as an individual?

A: In my experience of working more intimately with the deminers, I noted that each day efforts were coordinated with the resolve that there would be no more deaths and accidents due to mines. The PADCA offers survivors assistance, which includes providing prostheses for different parts of the body. Medical assistance that was not available in the past is now accessible. With this support we feel that we are people and that we can help our families and fulfill our responsibilities.

Q: What kind of things can be done to improve the world of demining?

A: In order to be of greater support to mine victims, we need more money from institutions and organizations in international donor countries.

that he was good for nothing. “Since this turning point, I have been adapting and realizing that I am important to society,” says Brown.

When PADCA came to the municipal where Brown lived, they needed a survivor to promote prevention. They found Brown in the community of Klampa and in May 2003, he began working as a promoter in the prevention group. As an advocate of the prevention campaign, Brown contributes to discussions about landmine accident prevention presented to different communities within the municipal of Waspam and to larger and wider audiences in the Rio Coco. The goal is to eliminate deaths and accidents in the different communities visited. To date, Brown has helped educate 25,000 in the Rio Coco.

* Photo by Juan Carlos Ruan.

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Humberto Brown, Nicaragua

In 1993, Humberto Brown had an accident with a PMN mine. He lost his right leg. “I passed years closed up in the house with my family. I went nowhere,” says Brown. “I am poor and did not have the money I needed to obtain a prosthetic device.”

With time and with the support of the PADCA, Brown was able to get a hold of a prosthetic device. Obtaining the device was critical to his ability to overcome the mentality

In the Words of Humberto Brown

Q: Where do you see mine action in 10 or 20 years and where do you fit into that vision?

A: Within 10 or 20 years, the municipal of Waspam should be free of mines so that the people of different communi-

ties who make a living through agriculture and raising cattle can work without fear. In the past, the mines occupied the majority of the terrain.

Q: If money and other obstacles weren't a problem, what would you do for the mine problem?

A: I would propose to be a lecturer. Every day I would bring the message of prevention to the classrooms, sharing with