

1. Finalise the Needs Assessment for MRE Colombia
2. Develop a Strategic Plan for MRE
3. Build technical capacity with the Observatorio
4. Develop an Operational Plan
5. Develop national standards

## Conclusion

The opportunity exists in Colombia to begin to address the serious consequences of mine use and insecurity that have resulted from the 40-year civil war. The GICHD has pledged to assist in these activities over the course of the next 18 months, through sponsoring international exchange of Observatorio staff as well as training and specific technical assistance missions.

\* Photo clo AP.

## Endnotes

1. See for example Human Rights Watch, *The "Sixth" Division: Military-Paramilitary Ties and U.S. Policy in Colombia*.
2. Office of the Vice President of Colombia, 2001:5.
3. ICBL, 2001:312-313.
4. Remarks by a participant at the roundtable on anti-personnel mines in California, 11 July 2002.
5. Office of the Vice President of Colombia, 2001:6.
6. Remarks made during the governmental roundtable on mine awareness, Bogota, 9 July 2002.
7. Office of the Vice President of Colombia, 2001:7.
8. The definition of a child is anyone under 18 years of age in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
9. Remarks by participants at the roundtable on anti-personnel mines in California, 11 July 2002; ICBL, 2001:320.
10. Remarks made during the governmental roundtable on mine awareness, Bogota, 9 July 2002.
11. Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention Article 7 Transparency Report of 30 April 2002.

12. Remarks made during the governmental roundtable on mine awareness, Bogota, 9 July 2002; Office of the Vice President of Colombia, 2001:10.
13. Office of the Vice President of Colombia, 2001:5.
14. In accordance with Article 3 of the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention.
15. Remarks made during the non-governmental roundtable on mine awareness, Bogota, 9 July 2002.

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# From Desperation to Self-Confidence:

## An Interview With Landmine Survivor Mr. Francisco Peralta

Mr. Francisco Peralta is a Nicaraguan landmine survivor from Ocotol, Department of Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua, who, as with many landmine victims, lost much more than his limbs to this weapon. Mr. Peralta lost his livelihood, his ability to support his family, his self-confidence, and his overall happiness. Through his integration into the Organization of American States' (OAS's) rehabilitation program, however, his life has changed 100 percent. Today he stands as a testament to the success of the OAS program and the need for this type of program to assist landmine survivors and help them literally and figuratively get back on their feet. Mr. Peralta explains his traumatic accident and the physical and emotional pain he has experienced throughout the years as "in the past" and is now equipped to forge ahead as a productive member of his community and family.

Juan Carlos Ruan (JCR): Could you provide us some background concerning your accident?



Francisco Peralta (FP): I was drafted to military service and was fulfilling a mission on the border with Honduras in San Andres de Bocay. I was walking along a path and heard an explosion. I did not know what had occurred. The only thing I felt was what I believed to be a grenade hitting my chest. I fell unconscious and approximately half an hour later, I awoke. I immediately wanted to get up. When I put my foot down I noticed that I was placing only bone on the ground. I fell again and that is when I notice that I had stepped on a mine that had torn off my foot, part of my arm, and some fingers. It had torn off my foot up to my knee. The shrapnel had also injured some of my friends.

One of my friends then came to my aid and grabbed my arm. Unfortunately, we were in a minefield and he stepped on another mine, which tore off the rest of my arm. He had lost one foot to the mine and was able to hop out of the minefield. The rest of the troop retreated as well. I was left in the hole that the mine explosion had created. I remained there for approximately two hours. They had

retreated out of the minefield and were waiting for evacuation assistance. I stepped on the mine at 10:00 am and spent the night there next to the river until the helicopter arrived and transferred me to a hospital where I received medical attention. The next day, they took me to Managua. It took three days to reach the Military Hospital in Managua. I remained there for two months recuperating from the injury and then they sent me to be fitted for a prosthetic limb.

JCR: How did you become involved in the OAS program?

FP: The Nicaraguan army offers insurance to injured soldiers, but we call it charity, a meager amount, as well as the medical attention and prosthesis. In my case, I had to pay for travel and would often have to go hungry in order to get my prosthesis. They would give me the prosthesis but no transportation, food or lodging. That was my responsibility. It was not much help. They gave me 200 córdobas. That was my pension. I lived in misery. I had a family. The life of a disabled person is very difficult. Sometimes I am ashamed of asking for assistance. I have had to ask for assistance many times. I have a family and I could not feed my children, I did not have a job; I had nowhere to go. I spent 12 years this way.

When heard that the OAS had a program to assist landmine victims, I contacted the OAS coordinator in Ocotol at the time and became more informed on the program. I asked him if it was true that a program existed that provided assistance. I told him that I was in critical situation and needed help. I took the accident information to the OAS; I was honest and told them that I was pensioned but that I needed help. Once I made this contact, I received assistance with my prosthesis including transportation, lodging, nutrition and a per diem. I also received a pair of shoes for my prosthesis.

In addition to my leg and arm injury, the shrapnel also affected my vision for which I requested assistance. They sent me to an eye surgeon to get an operation and gave me some glasses. Since then I have been part of the program. Now, thankfully, we have people speaking for us in different forums like in Geneva. Thank God we found funding for the training and reintegration program... I thank the OAS for everything. Today I am a woodworker.

JCR: Tell me a bit about your experiences during the training.

FP: I was very happy when I was chosen for training, but I did not pay it too much attention. I did not want to leave the family. Then I began thinking that I had to make the sacrifice. I was never used to leaving my community for long periods of time after my accident. I thought to myself that it was only nine months and that I was going to take advantage of them. I really did not think about being a



Francisco Peralta, once despondent due to his landmine injuries, has become a productive woodworker thanks to the OAS rehabilitation program.

woodworker because I was not familiar with any of the tools. I asked myself, "How am I going to do this?" When I started, they gave me the tools. I began sanding the wood with my one hand and I felt like I could not do it. I thought I would quit after a week. Then I committed myself to working hard, and with some limitations I learned how to do it. It was a great thing. Slowly I gained experience and eventually became confident in my abilities.

JCR: How has the program helped you?

FP: For one, my behavior is very different than it was in the past. Frankly, I was an anti-social person. I was very rebellious. This was due to the situation in which I lived. It was difficult seeing that my children were in need. I was not able to obtain what I wanted because of how I was. I had all the vices; that has been a big change. My self-esteem was very low. That is one of the greatest things the program has offered me; self-esteem. There was a time when I opted for suicide, seeing that I could not support my family. I was already tired of so much suffering. I suffered, my children suffered, my mother suffered, my brothers suf-

fered.... I wanted to get involved with things that would only lead to death or incarceration. Thank God I did not get involved in these things and the program reached me in time. The program has given me life. The program came to pick me up and give me a hand; now I am on my feet. My family is very thankful.

JCR: What are your hopes for the future?

FP: First of all, people look at a handicapped person badly. [Where I live,] they call them delinquents, because perhaps they have seen them drunk, robbing someone, whatever... That is what I was. I was isolating myself from the community through my behavior and because I was handicapped the society was isolating me as well. The problem of mines is something that is a horrible threat for the civilian populations. I invite donors, organizations that have the solidarity spirit with Nicaragua to continue with this solidarity supporting mine victims in Nicaragua and other countries where mines are a threat. As I said, before the OAS program I had opted for suicide. I was in a chaotic situation; I could not find what to do. Today I am not the same person. Today I feel as if I am an example for some disabled and other people as well. I would like to see the program continue so that we disabled people have the opportunity to improve ourselves.

## Conclusion

Mr. Peralta's story is not unique. Many people throughout the hemisphere have suffered landmine accidents. Unfortunately, without the kind of assistance provided by organizations such as the OAS, these landmine survivors are often left in desperate situations. To date, 106 people have graduated from the OAS social reintegration program, with relative success. Seventy more survivors are projected to begin training in 2004. For each participant that is able and, more important, willing to be rehabilitated, there are those that are not able to overcome their traumatic experience or social condition. However, the number of survivors that do become rehabilitated justifies a large investment in this program. It takes one glance into the life of a landmine survivor before and after the program to realize the importance of its existence as well as its achievements.

continued on page 34. Peralta

**Peralta**, continued from page 25

*\* Photos c/o author.*

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