

THE PROCESS OF DEMINING AND DESTROYING

UXO

IN GUATEMALA

Demining

The process of demining and destroying UXO in Guatemala is characterized by a collaborative effort between civilians and military personnel. This process is conducted in a diplomatic manner between the parties of the 36-year internal armed conflict, which the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) and the National Army concluded in 1996. Likewise, the demining and UXO destruction operations that Guatemala executes reflect the characteristics that were prevalent during the armed conflict, including the rare use of anti-personnel mines and UXO proliferation.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the Central American countries initiated the political process of providing closure to the confrontations that were prevalent in the region. In the case of Guatemala, the peace process began with the signing of a firm and lasting peace on December 29, 1996. During this process, many agreements were signed, including ones that reemphasized demining as a priority.

On June 17, 1994, in the city of Oslo, Norway, an Agreement of Resettlement of the Displaced Population due to the Armed Conflict "recognized the necessity of proceeding with emergency removal of every type of mine and explosive artifacts buried or abandoned in these areas [where the conflict took place], and the commitment to lend all types of cooperation for these activities." (Title II, Guarantee for the Resettlement of the Displaced Population, Numeral 4)

In the beginning of 1995, the return of refugees began to areas that the National Commission for the Attention to Returnees, Refugees and Displaced Peoples (CEAR)

acquired for this purpose. Because of the concern of offering guarantees to the displaced population, the Volunteer Fireman's Corps (CVB) was called upon. They received training from a German non-governmental organization (NGO), Coordinator of Projects to Overcome Damages of War (GPC), in locating, detecting, and marking mines and UXO in affected areas. Members of the Army Corps of Engineers of Guatemala carried out the destruction of mines and UXO.

In order to strengthen the process, on August 17, 1995, the Congress of Guatemala emitted Decree 60-95, which created the Coordinating Commission for the "Program for the Reduction of Risks to Inhabitants of Affected Areas due to the Armed Conflict, Through the Location and Destruction of Mines and Other UXO," (generally called the Demining Coordinating Commission). Members include the deputy president of the Legislative Commission for Peace Studies of the Congress of the Republic, who presides; a representative of the CVB; a representative of the CEAR; and a representative of the GPC. The general objective of the Program is locating and deactivating mines and UXO in populated areas that are considered territories or areas affected by the armed conflict. Here they would fulfill the task of tracking, detecting, and destroying mines and other UXO.

On June 5, 1997, the Congress of Guatemala reformed the Legislative Decree Number 46-97, which changed to Decree Number 60-95. The objective was to provide the Demining Coordinating Committee with an Executive Coordination Unit (UCE). The UCE would develop, execute and administer a National Plan to comply with the instituted Program to detect, deactivate and detonate

any mines or UXO in the areas established in the National Plan. The UCE is integrated by an Executive Coordinator named by the Coordinating Commission, a representative of the CVB, a representative of the demobilized URNG and a representative of the Ministry of National Defense. In August 1997, the UCE presented the National Demining and UXO Destruction Plan to the Coordinating Commission. The plan was approved and then presented to the Organization of American States (OAS) within the framework of the Assistance Program for Demining in Central America (PADCA). The objective was including Guatemala in the program that the PADCA/OAS had been executing in Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica since 1992—the same year that the government of Guatemala solicited to be considered within the Program but had to be excluded at the time due to the conflict.

Following a number of visits, the PADCA/OAS decided to support and advise the Demining Coordinating Commission in the administration and execution of the National Plan. In December 1997 they initiated the program installation in Guatemala, which included a representation of International Supervisors of the Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in Central America (MARMINCA). The program brings together officers from contributing countries (Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras). These countries collaborate in the direct supervision of the operations entity that depends directly on the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB).

In the process of fulfilling the obligations of the Peace Agreement, in February 1997, a peacekeeping force was deployed by the United Nations to Guatemala. With the support of demobilized URNG personnel and the Guatemalan army, the forces proceeded to verify the destruction of the only minefields identified by the URNG in the Tajumulco Volcano. These efforts led to the destruction of 329 claymore mines.

Within the framework of the Ottawa process that culminated in the signing of the Convention in Ottawa, the Congress of the Republic emitted a Legislative Decree Number 106-97. This created the Law for the Prohibition of the Production, Sale, Importation, Exportation, Transfer, Use and Possession of Anti-personnel Mines and Anti-detection Devices, or parts of these devices. As a result, Guatemala is the first country on the continent that legislates internally on matters

The national plan is composed of the following phases:

1. Training and supplying phase carried out at the beginning of each year.

2. Mine risk education (MRE) and locating, detecting, and removing/destroying mines and UXO in the following areas:

- El Quiché
- San Marcos
- Quetzaltenango, Retalhuleu y Totonicapán
- Huchuetenango
- Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz y el sur de El Petén
- Sololá, Chimaltenango, Suchitepéquez y Escuintla

relative to anti-personnel mines.

In December 1998, the UCE of the Demining Coordinating Commission initiated the operations within the framework of National Demining and UXO Destruction Plan. With the support and advice of PADCA/OAS, the efforts began in the municipality of Ixcán in the department of El Quiché. After armed conflict, this area was considered to be the most affected. The UCE in August 1999 initiated a periodic review of the National Demining and UXO Destruction Plan. The Specific Plan determines the area of execution and application that determines the expansion by area of risk until the year 2004.

MRE

The first phase of the MRE operation is carried out in cooperation with the CVB and the Demobilized URNG and consists of providing MRE to the communities. The CVB and the Demobilized URNG carry out an MRE campaign focused on the following three points:

1. Providing MRE through information on how to handle a mine and/or item of UXO with the support of television, radio and local press to disseminate information of possible areas or mines and/or artifacts that exist.

2. Maintaining a good relationship with the assigned community. The process begins with a visit to the local authorities and public leaders in order to be accepted by the community.

3. Maintaining and updating database and cartographic information for fieldwork during the execution of the operation. This effort is supported by the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) by the Geneva International Humanitarian Demining Center (GICHD).

A series of materials was designed to transmit the message to the communities. Stickers, calendars, notebooks, hats, bookbags and other objects were distributed during MRE process. Within indigenous communities, the message is disseminated in the native language of the community through one-on-one and radio

communication.

Victim Assistance

Because anti-personnel mines were seldom used during the internal armed conflict, the number of victims was low and did not require a victim assistance program. The majority of casualties are caused by UXO manipulation. The majority of these victims are children.

William de León, Public Relations Official and representative of the CVB before the UCE, expressed the following: "Since 1994 approximately 25 people have died due to

mines or UXO, but before this date we do not have a registry of injuries. We do not have the necessary information to ensure that there have not been other victims because they don't come to us for help or medical assistance. Many of them go to hospitals and they do not transfer the information to us, so I consider it almost impossible that someone will be able to collect such information."

The Guatemalan Red Cross is an institution that provides assistance to the injured in the demining phase through a group of paramedics and, in case of an accident, provides transportation.

The Centro de Atención al Discapacitado del Ejército de Guatemala (CADEG) is currently in charge of lending assistance to the military victims of the conflict. Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also provided these services, such as the Asociación de Discapacitados de Guerra. The CADEG was created through Governmental Agreement No. 795-98 on November 12, 1998. The principal mission was to provide medical, psychological, and training assistance and other activities derived and directed towards injured personnel. Those who are assisted have been in active military service or are involved in actions derived from the internal armed conflict. They suffer from physical and psychological disabilities and are associated with the Guatemalan army.

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