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An Interview With Mine Awareness Expert Mr. Porfirio Gomez

by Juan Carlos Ruan, OAS

One of the key components of the Mine Action Program of the Organization of American States (OAS) is mine risk education (MRE). It is the belief of the program that the most important measure one can take to ensure that affected communities practice safe behavior is to educate them on the risks associated with landmines and UXO. The objective of this component is to not solely attain the reduction of the risk of injury or death by promoting safe behavior, but also provide solutions to high-risk behavior that is observed in some affected communities. This is done through a number of mechanisms including mass media, visits to communities and a variety of school programs. It is also important to highlight the reciprocal relationship of MRE with the affected communities. The members of a community not only learn about the dangers of anti-personnel mines, but also, in specific cases where no mine registry exists, are the principal source of information for locating mined areas and UXO. Mr. Porfirio Gomez, a mine awareness expert in Nicaragua, lent valuable insight into the MRE campaign in Nicaragua.

Juan Carlos Ruan (JCR): Tell us a bit of the situation of mine-affected areas in Nicaragua.

Porfirio Gomez (PG): First of all, people in rural areas have customs, they are agriculturists, and due to their necessity to cultivate the land, they would often enter minefields and start removing mines without any equipment, solely with the use of their eye. Sometimes they would find them and break off their fuses and throw them into the fire to destroy them. In other cases, there were people that would take them out of the ground and find out how to remove the explosive in order to use it for fishing in the river. This practice took many lives and has caused many to lose their legs, hands and/or eyes.

Children of approximately six to 10 years of age are of great concern since this is the age when children are considered most mischievous. When they find a mine, they often start throwing things at it to cause it to explode. Additionally, if they see the father or brother disarming landmines, they are going to try to disarm them themselves and in that way cause serious injury or death. Most often other children are injured as well because they are usually doing this with their friends. Unfortunately, minefields were not always marked and there have been a number of children and adults that have suffered landmine accidents.

Once people in the rural area suffer a landmine accident, life becomes very difficult. There is a big difference between someone who lives in the rural area and someone in the urban

area. Rural life is a lot more physical. The paths, for example, in rural areas are in very bad condition in the summer and much worse in the winter, a lot of rain and a lot of vegetation. The inhabitants, usually farmers, who suffer an accident and lose a leg or arm are greatly impacted. It is not only the victim but the family as well that suffers. If the victim is the sole earner in the family, which is often the case, the impact on the economic condition of the family is also great.

JCR: How do you carry out mine risk education tasks?

PG: First of all, I use a prosthetic [limb], and working in the mountains is very difficult. I am not trying to say that I am the best of the handicapped or the most agile, but the areas in which I work are very difficult to reach. Often I have to go on foot. However, it does not matter; I have all day and some nights to visit the last house. I try never to think of the distance of the mountain or the climate, my one goal is to reach every house without missing one.

I cannot assume that in that house on the top of the mountain they have not found UXO or that the father is not an amateur deminer or that the kids have not located UXO or a mine. By neglecting a house, we can miss a fuse, a mine or a grenade that was found in a field. If we do not visit a house, and within time an accident occurs, it will weigh on our consciences. I would suffer eternally for not having reached that house. If one reaches the house, even though exhausted, and speaks to the children and the adults educate them on the dangers, one can leave with a satisfied soul knowing that the risk of accident has been minimized. And that is how it happens. We leave a calendar, poster or a sign on mountains and outside houses. Sometimes they want us to put it inside their house but we want it to be outside so other passersby can see them.

I have to say, I have had to travel in hard times under a strong sun and in rain, but thank God that the day that I die I will be able to die calmly knowing that the OAS mission has been fulfilled. If we have to go by boat, well ... we go by boat.

JCR: How do you approach a community?

PG: In the first place, we begin with the information we have at headquarters and construct an action plan for the visit; house to house, school to school, etc. To visit with the schools, we first visit with the municipal delegate of education. When we visit the houses we first visit the mayor of the municipality. If there are communal movements, we visit the coordinators of each movement to organize the days when we are going to work there and they, in turn, inform the community that we will be arriving. Where there is no communal movement, other leaders exist and we visit them first to ask for help in coordinating our visit with the community. This guarantees that we receive good coverage within the community. Teachers also help us coordinate and advise parents, through the children, that we will be arriving and visiting the houses and to please be at home. Sometimes it is very hard to reach the houses and it is even more difficult when you struggle to reach a house and there is nobody home. Other people that help us advise the communities about our visits are the pastors of the community and the coordinator of the small communities of the Catholic Church. These are community leaders that we use to assist us.

When we meet the community, we are wearing the mine risk education vests that identify us. We inform them that we are promoting the program due to the fact that we find it very important that they realize that these artifacts can kill them. Our objective is to finish with the dangers and not have the dangers finish with someone. We show them the rotafolio [rotating portfolio with mine risk education material] and answer their questions. Also, we look for methods to win the trust of the people we are trying to reach. We do not

... speak to people with big words or words they do not understand, we speak to them as is custom in their communities, for example the PPMSR mines they call them *saltarinas* so we call them *saltarinas* so they understand us. The PMN mine they call it *la vaquelita*, so we call it *la vaquelita*. In other areas they call it something else. We use their lingo. Within the mine risk education component, the lingo is well-coordinated.

JCR: What is the reaction of the community when someone like you arrives to the town to speak to them about landmines and what is the message you try to convey?

PG: This program is incredibly important to the inhabitants as well as to the rest of the population. We want to inform them not to touch these artifacts or to attempt to remove them. We make sure that the people are informed on the presence of mines so that they can, therefore, protect themselves and their family. Sometimes we meet with adults that dedicate themselves to mine removal—they say, "It's nothing. I have been taking them out without a problem." Based on this, children think, "Well, my brother removes mines; I can do it too." Therein lies the tragedy.

If there is someone in the community that is carrying out these activities, we tell them that they do not have to risk their lives in this way, they do not know which mine is going to kill them or at what moment. We inform them of the fact that mines remain active for a long period of time, about their destructive power, and about the fact that the army is well-trained to locate and destroy them and that they utilizes protective equipment when doing so. We make them visualize the consequence of their actions, the fact that they should think about their children and their family, the fact that they do not have insurance and if they suffer an accident, the whole community will have to assist [and] he and his family may be left in desperate conditions. The only way not to suffer these consequences is not to touch these mines. Then the people begin to understand and many have, thankfully, stopped this practice.

If you ever have the opportunity to travel with us, you will see the tremendous happiness in the kids and adults. For the kids, because normally we bring them a notebook, a ruler, a backpack—they like these things because they do not have the resources to buy them. They are so happy, as if they just won the grand prize. The parents are very happy as well. When they notice the OAS is coming to visit a school, the parents try to leave their work early to listen to the chat; it is not only for the children. Even when the school is just a hut with a plastic roof, the adults hang around the hut listening to the chat. After this chat, questions are asked of the children to ensure that they received the message: what do you think about mines? What should you do when you find a mine? They begin answering the questions very enthusiastically. If someone does not ask questions it means that either they understood everything we are saying or they did not understand anything. It is very important to us that they understand that these artifacts can cause death. At the end, the parents, in a sincere and humble way, say that they appreciate infinitely the OAS, not only for the pencils and notebooks, but also for being concerned about their safety, clearing the areas and removing the dangers. They say very frankly that we are the only organization that reaches these areas.

Sometimes there are student groups that want to come and help us carry out mine awareness so we sometimes invite these student groups to educate the other schools in the communities. Sometimes the students have information about the location of a mine. We then go verify it and coordinate the destruction with the army. Thank God we have been successful in our efforts. I am very thankful to be able to carry the OAS message.

JCR: Tell me a bit about the dual relationship between the community and the program.

PG: There are many benefits to the demining program gained from visiting the

communities. The people who know where the landmines are located are the people who live in the affected communities. This is because there exists the phenomenon that some mined areas [are] not registered. These people are often the only ones that know their location. There are many reasons for this: perhaps a deer, a cow, a horse or even a person suffered a mine accident. Therefore, we try to find out the distance of the minefield from the houses, from the kids and the adults. All the people interest us. There are a number of community leaders that we use to assist us in this as well. They are sources of information. If a farmer finds a mine, he can help inform us. Then we go and verify the information, establish the coordinates and the type of artifact, and then pass on the information to headquarters which then coordinates the destruction with the national army. In fact, a week ago we received information from a communal leader of an area called El Ural where a child had found a mine.

We locate the people that found an artifact and they advise us on its location. There are several cases like this. Information always reaches us. This situation causes us to make sporadic visits to specific people and to rural community leaders.... Almost always they have some information for us about a grenade or mine. What we cannot do is visit the community once and never return. We have a network of information, which is key to the program. We always re-visit the communities. In an area called El Ojo de Agua and Las Pampas, in Jalapa, they always have information for us about mines, from children going to school or people working in the field. We always maintain ... this information network to ensure that these mines do not cause a disaster.

When the community receives us, one of the first questions we have for them is if a mine has injured someone or some animal. Then, they may tell us that there was someone who suffered a mine accident that lives in this or that house. We proceed to visit with the family. They are horrified at these weapons and are very happy that we are in the community. We take the example of these people that have died and they, in turn, serve as a constant reminder to the community. Also, when we destroy a landmine close to the community, the explosion serves as a reminder of how destructive a landmine is.

JCR: Is there anything you would like to tell the donor community?

PG: Donors that would like to verify that our mission is, in fact, important [should] contact the national coordinator, Mr. Carlos Orozco, and we can attempt to arrange a visit to the area of the mountains where we are operating so they can see the importance of our message firsthand. Don't listen to us; listen to the people that are in the rural areas, in the schools ... the farmers. They should listen to the inhabitants of these mine-affected regions.

JCR: What is your wish for the future of Nicaragua?

PG: My greatest wish is that no mine remains, but some mines have been displaced and are no longer in their original location. Also, some people who have removed mines no longer live in the area and cannot be located. My greatest wish is that no mine or UXO remains in the fields, but it is hard work that can only be accomplished with the help of God and the support of the OAS program, and hopefully the donor community will collaborate with the OAS in order to support this program. This is not going to be over anytime soon.

In regards to the victim assistance, the OAS demining program is programmed to be completed in 2005. What will happen when the OAS completes this program, who is going to cooperate with the victims like the OAS has done? The government? I doubt it. It is a very poor county. It is the greatest concern since the victims that have been trained are very happy and are working hard, but when this is over what organizations are going to

help us? We don't know. I would like the international community and the OAS to think about the support that they are going to offer to the victims once the program is over. That is what really worries us; they will be subsistent for a little while, but when there are no more resources, it will be a disaster—it would be returning to the position in which they once found themselves. And we hope that they will never forget that mine victims exist. On behalf of the OAS, the people are very grateful, but there remains a need for greater effort from the international community, NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and from donors. There is a need.

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