



Mine Action in Central and South America

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Non-State Actors in Colombia, Guatemala and Nicaragua

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The majority of wars fought in the last 50 years have involved non-state, anti-state or stateless actors. These groups, commonly referred to as insurgents, dissidents, freedom fighters, rebel groups or guerillas, act independently from recognized governments. These non-state actors (NSAs) typically use low-tech, homemade weapons, such as landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and other small arms and light weapons to wage guerilla warfare. Civil war, economic instability and a booming illegal drug trade have resulted in a build-up of arms and have thus empowered Latin American NSAs. Due in part to growing insurgent strength, parts of Latin America has been heavily mined. Colombia, Guatemala and Nicaragua continue to wage wars against either violent NSA uprisings or the landmines they have left behind.

Colombia

With a history of a divided political system, 35 years of civil war and the strength of multiple insurgent groups, Colombia remains the only country in the Americas where anti-personnel landmines are used on a regular basis. Colombian authorities are unable to produce an exact estimate, but some say over 90,000 mines threaten 10 percent of the Colombian population on a daily basis. Of these, NSAs are estimated to be directly responsible for the placement of 50,000 anti-personnel landmines located in 105 municipalities in 23 departments. NSA's have also reportedly used anti-vehicle mines. Since January 2003, more than 800 people have been injured or killed by landmines planted by Colombian NSAs. Though most of Colombia's NSAs acknowledge they both use and manufacture anti-personnel landmines, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) are believed to be responsible for most major mine use.

FARC

Through much of the 1970s and 1980s, not only did Colombian illegal drug production grow, but the strength of leftist guerrilla groups did as well. The accumulation of weapons, money and power bred an increase of radical actions by already violent NSAs. FARC, established in 1964, began as a paramilitary branch of the Colombian Communist Party. Their purpose has since evolved into allegedly representing the rural poor against Colombia's wealthy class. Organized by military structure, some 18,000 members operate in over 45 percent of Colombian territory.

To take action against Colombian military, economic and political targets, FARC has taken

responsibility for bombings, kidnappings, hijackings and using landmines. FARC gains half of its annual budget, approximately \$200–400 million (U.S.), from illegal drug trading, ransom and extortion schemes. To further its goals and fund its cause, FARC targets any organization or individual believed to be a threat. This group is most known for kidnapping landowners, foreign tourists and prominent officials for ransom. In March 1999, FARC was found responsible for kidnapping three U.S. Indian rights activists in Colombia and then for their murder in Venezuela.

To satisfy a condition to begin peace talks, Colombian president Andres Pastrana allowed FARC to claim a 42,000-square-kilometer zone to serve as its headquarters. In what was supposed to be a movement towards peace, FARC instead used the area to collect arms, manufacture landmines and recruit child soldiers to strengthen its military. In February 2002, all peace talks between the government and FARC ended after the group kidnapped Colombian presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. Consequently, Pastrana ordered Colombian army control over the FARC-occupied zone and an offensive to defeat the insurgency.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), the 2002 collapse of peace negotiations between FARC and the Colombian government resulted in a major increase in the number of anti-personnel landmines used by guerrilla groups. Of the reported 638 mine-related incidents of 2002, FARC is believed to be responsible for 237 incidents or 37 percent. The 2003 *Landmine Monitor Report* lists at least five confirmed incidents in which FARC was directly responsible for planting mines in fields and towns or near roads. In three cases, Colombians were either killed or injured.

In February 2003, an arrested FARC member claimed responsibility for planting 17 mines around a small plane. In less than four months during 2003, FARC was responsible for landmines that killed 11 soldiers and injured an equal number of civilians.

ELN

Claiming shared responsibility for the landmine crisis with FARC is the insurgent group ELN. Founded in 1965, ELN has approximately 5,000 armed combatants and a countless number of active followers. Hoping to model Cuba's communist revolution in Colombia, this NSA uses Fidel Castro and Che Guevara as political inspirations. Similar to FARC, ELN claims to represent the rural poor against the wealthy class. The Marxist rebel group hoped to gain a zone of control comparable to the one given by the Colombian government to FARC, but was unsuccessful.

In addition to bombings, kidnappings for ransom and extortion against Colombian oil companies, ELN is known for its heavy use of landmines. In 2002, ELN was responsible for 85 incidents in which a victim of a landmine blast was either injured or killed. ELN claims that if the Colombian army stops all arbitrary attacks against them, then their group will discontinue using mines.

In May of 2003, ELN made similar claims to conditionally end the use of mines. Members of ELN Central Command met with representatives from Geneva Call, an organization dedicated to engaging armed NSAs, to discuss Colombia's landmine crisis. ELN insisted it would not stop the use of landmines unless the Colombian government first ended its use of weapons and random attacks. Though ELN made no promises, representatives said they recognized the violent effect of landmine use and were prepared to investigate arrangements with local populations to prevent civilian injury.

Because mines used by NSAs in Colombia tend to be homemade and metal-free, they cannot be sensed by most detectors used in demining. This, along with the alarming rate of increase in rebel landmine use, has intensified efforts to end NSA violence. In June

2004, ELN established a peace proposal with Colombian president Alvaro Uribe to limit the use of landmines and release civilian hostages in exchange for the release of imprisoned ELN members. Mexican Ambassador Mario Chacon offered the use of his country to host ELN and Colombian government talks. To date, ELN and the government of Colombia continue in an effort to find common ground and facilitate advancements toward peace.

Guatemala

In the span of 15 years, one of Guatemala's NSAs transformed from a violent guerilla insurgency into a legitimate political party and important force behind local demining. In 1982, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) emerged as an umbrella organization for four leftist Guatemalan groups. The Guerilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the Revolutionary Organization of Armed People (ORPA), the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) and the Guatemalan Labor Party (PGT) aligned forces as URNG to sabotage the economy and stage armed attacks against the government.

Joining a civil war in which tens of thousands of Guatemalans had already died, the URNG continued an insurgency against the government and national army. Many Guatemalans relocated, fled the country or chose to join URNG forces. During the war, the Guatemalan government claims to have never used landmines, but the URNG used IEDs and produced mines from plastic tubing, potassium nitrate and gunpowder. To defend their base camps, the URNG mined the Tajumulco volcano region of Guatemala heavily. Though the URNG made limited use of landmines, directional mines and close-range weapons were used against the national army.

In 1996, the war ended after 200,000 unarmed civilian deaths. Officials estimate that after 35 years of war there were approximately 1,500 mines threatening Guatemalan civilians and between 5,000 and 8,000 items of UXO. Negotiated under UN supervision, a peace accord was signed by the Guatemalan government and the URNG that included agreements on human rights, constitutional reforms and incorporating the URNG as a legal political entity. The URNG then regrouped as a legally recognized political party and demanded an end to human rights violations. Since 1996, Guatemala has neither produced nor used landmines.

In the years following the peace accord, demobilized URNG members have cooperated with the government of Guatemala to identify and destroy landmines. The Guatemalan army, members of URNG and the Volunteer Firemen's Corps are all members of the Executive Coordinating Unit (UCE) concentrating their efforts to locate and remove landmines. As the result of agreements established during the peace accord process, the Guatemalan government issued Legislative Decree 60-95 calling for a national mine and UXO clearance program. The URNG handed over its largest minefield to the United Nations Mission for Guatemala. The entire area was cleared by April 1997. This cooperation of efforts resulted in the destruction of 329 mines. Not only has the URNG handed over minefields for clearance, but demobilized members have also played an active role in the demining process. Former URNG guerrillas act as guides to provide information about the location of mines and teach during mine awareness campaigns in schools of mine-affected communities.

Due to organized mine clearance, Guatemala does not currently have a landmine crisis. Cooperation between demobilized URNG and state deminers allowed Guatemalan officials to move ahead the date for completion of clearance. To date, most removal efforts are focused on clearing land of all items of UXO. Complete UXO clearance is expected by the end of 2004 or early 2005.

Nicaragua

Much of Nicaragua's landmine problem is the result of the political Contra War between the Counter-revolutionaries (Contras) and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The Contras, formed in the early 1980s, are best known for their armed insurgency against Nicaragua's FSLN government. Violent conflict, spearheaded by the FSLN, ended the rule of Nicaragua's U.S.-supported president, Anastasio Somoza in 1979. Subsequently, the more radical, leftist political movement of FSLN took control of the government and initiated major social, political and economic reform. They redistributed land, improved public services, unionized Nicaragua's workers and established non-aligned foreign relations. But by 1980, conflicts between the FSLN and its opponents began to reemerge.

According to Nicaragua's Article 7 report, 135,643 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines were laid during the Contra War. Additionally, all sides claim responsibility for an unknown number of items of UXO. Though exact numbers are unknown, both the Sandinista army and the Contras used landmines during the war. The Sandinistas mostly used mines provided by the Soviet bloc, while the Contras used Brazilian mines called *quitadedos* or "remove toes." Mines from East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Egypt have been found in Nicaragua. Between 1982 and 1989, 465 minefields were created along the border of Nicaragua and Honduras. Estimates suggest that there is one minefield for every 55 Nicaraguans and at least 600,000 Nicaraguans are directly threatened by the presence of a mined area.

The Contras have been accused of laying the majority of landmines during the war. Making no effort to warn civilians of mine placement, Contra fighters planted mines near electric towers, power stations, and bridges and on main highways. Though mine placement was intended to target the military, they were often placed in locations used more frequently by civilians. Because there is no national registry of Nicaraguan mine-related injuries or deaths, the exact number of civilian casualties is unknown. The United Nations believes about 1,500 people have been injured by mines and another 10–20 mine incidents occur per year.

Not only did the Contra War cause a landmine situation for Nicaragua, but also for its neighbors, Honduras and Costa Rica. Honduran officials state that of the 3,000 landmines planted during the war, 2,000 of these were found less than a few hundred meters from the border. None of these mines were placed by Hondurans, but rather by the Sandinistas and the Contras during the 1980s to protect the Nicaraguan border.

Honduran officials estimate that approximately 200 civilians have been killed in landmine incidents since the end of the Contra War. Similarly, Costa Rica had an estimated 5,000 mines planted on its border with Nicaragua. Seven years ahead of the 2007 goal, deminers declared Costa Rica mine free. In April 2001, Nicaragua's southern border with Costa Rica was the first Nicaraguan area to be declared mine free.¹

Editor's Note: Many countries and mine action organizations have begun using the term "mine safe" as opposed to "mine free" because of the impossibility to guarantee that every single landmine has been cleared from a mined area. "Mine safe" usually refers to the removal of mines that can or will have an immediate impact on a community.

Free elections in 1990, 1996 and 2001 resulted in the defeat of Sandinista power. Increasing domestic stability has led to economic growth, political stability and enhanced demining efforts. In 1998, however, such efforts were hindered by Hurricane Mitch, which flooded large portions of Nicaragua. Further complicating the demining process, flooding relocated mines to areas that at one time were mine-free. After much of the land was scattered with debris, previous surveys of minefields were now useless. Nevertheless, in 2003, Nicaragua announced it had cleared 89,191 of the 135,643 landmines, but would have to delay its

mine clearance date from 2004 to 2005.

Conclusion

Latin America's history of instability has undoubtedly contributed to the momentum gained by NSAs. Consequently, political officials seek alternatives to war as means for reconciliation with non-state groups. Engaging Latin American NSAs in a discussion with local government is an important step toward reconciliation. Involvement between NSAs and state governments ends the seclusion in which they thrive and legitimizes their efforts for peace. The Non-State Actors Working Group (NSAWG) facilitates dialogue between non-state and state parties involved in crisis. In Latin America, NSAWG has approached insurgent groups with hopes of establishing NSA commitment to a landmine ban. NSAWG has approached groups in Colombia, Guatemala and Nicaragua, as well as other Latin American countries, to facilitate conversations between NSAs and the communities they threaten.

Endnote

1. In October 2004 Honduras joined Costa Rica in becoming mine safe.

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