

Colombia

History

Referred to as *La Violencia*, political unrest in Colombia's countryside lasted from 1948 until 1962. Efforts to overthrow the Colombian government escalated again in the 1990s with a rebel uprising. To forward their advances, four different guerilla groups used landmines, staged coups and attempted political assassinations. Guerilla attacks led mostly by the Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC), National Liberation Army (ELN) and United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), combined with drug cultivation, social inequities and widespread violence, contributed to Colombia's 40-year political crisis. Upon his election in 2002, President Alvaro Uribe promised to begin taking action to end the power of the FARC and ELN and curb illicit drug production.

Landmines/UXO Overview

With over 23,000 stockpiled mines and 100,000 landmines filling 422 municipalities, Colombia remains the only country in the Americas where landmines continue to be planted regularly. In addition to those still being used, landmines remain from Colombia's 40 years of civil war, including those from *La Violencia*. Even though the Colombian government signed the Ottawa Convention in 1997 and ratified Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons in 2000, guerilla groups FARC, ELN and AUC, as well as other paramilitary groups, have openly admitted to producing and using anti-personnel landmines. FARC is also known to produce a type of anti-vehicle mine. In 2003, the United Nations suspected the Colombian army of using anti-personnel mines in southwestern Colombia. The mines, the army claimed, were marked to prevent civilian casualties and used to defend a hydroelectric power station from FARC

attacks. The Colombian army believes over 20,000 mines are located in "strategic" sites around military bases. These minefields are claimed to be well-marked and have caused no civilians casualties. The Colombian government plans to destroy all stockpiled landmines by February 2005.

Casualties

According to the United Nations, Colombia is now ranked fourth highest in the world for victims of landmines. The 2003 *Landmine Monitor Report* recorded casualties more than doubled from 216 in 2001 to 530 in 2002. This number continued to rise with 660 deaths in 2003. Compared to 29 reported deaths in 1990, these figures have dramatically increased in the last decade. The Anti-Personnel Mine Observatory recorded 1,920 casualties between 1990 and 2003 from landmines and UXO. Of these, 774 were civilian and 1,114 were military casualties. In 2004 alone, landmines killed or injured 421 Colombians, according to the Anti-Personnel Mine Observatory.

Demining

Though no official demining program exists in Colombia, efforts to train dogs and demining experts are underway. Recently, Queen Noor and President Uribe witnessed the destruction of 6,800 stockpiled landmines in Bogota's main plaza. This public demonstration was an effort to prove Colombia's commitment to destroy all government-owned mines. In addition, the Colombian army reports training 877 deminers and clearing 1,054 minefields with 450 mine detection dogs (MDDs). While rebel groups may spend two dollars to make a mine, the army spends 100 to find and remove it. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, in order to effectively



demine and communicate the risk to Colombians, awareness programs must be implemented over the next six years in 60 locales.

Reality Check

Efforts to demine Colombia are hindered by the constant placement of mines by guerilla groups. However, according to the Colombian Campaign Against Landmines, talks are underway with the ELN to prevent the use of mines near roads and schools. On the other hand, Ricardo Gonzalez, a FARC commander, justifies his use of *queiebrapatas* ("leg-breakers") because they are cheap and effective. In an interview with *Avante* magazine he explains, "We're not guerrilla millionaires."

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