

# Costa Rica

## History

Settled by Spain in 1522, Costa Rica remained under Spanish control for three centuries before declaring its independence from Spain along with other Central American provinces in 1821. The Central American Federation, created by the newly independent provinces, was soon interrupted by border disputes. Costa Rica formally withdrew from the Federation in 1838, declaring its sovereignty. In 1899, the country became a democracy, holding what were considered to be its first truly free elections. This peaceful democracy was only disrupted twice, being controlled by a dictator from 1917 to 1919 and experiencing an uprising in 1948 due to a disputed presidential election. While this civil war lasted only several weeks, it was the bloodiest in recent Costa Rican history, leaving over 2,000 dead. Since drafting its new constitution in 1953, the country has held 13 democratic elections, most recently in 2002.

## Landmines/UXO Overview

Costa Rica has been subject to territorial border disputes with Nicaragua, stemming from turmoil concerning the election of rival political leaders in the 1970s and 1980s. Due to the conflict, landmines began infiltrating Costa Rica following occupation of Sandanista rebel military bases in northern Costa Rica. For over 12 years, Nicaragua populated Costa Rica's northern border with landmines because of the disputes.

Many believe that Costa Rica was never a manufacturer of landmines. The country has never publicly claimed to manufacture or stockpile landmines. Due to the border dispute between Costa Rica and neighboring Nicaragua, however, Costa Rica's Ministry of Security's Mine Clearance program had estimated that the northern border contained upwards of 3,000 landmines. The majority of the affected landscape in Costa Rica had been used primarily for agriculture.

## Casualties

According to the most recent available statistics, no new mine casualties were reported in Costa Rica in 2002. That same year, the Organization of American States (OAS) provided some assistance to the country's three known mine survivors through the OAS/Mine Victim Rehabilitation Program. Currently, Costa Rica does not have a landmine victim assistance program nor a clinic to treat landmine injuries. However, the Costa Rican Social Security Office has constructed a medical camp with a staff of personnel, which has helped the populations residing near mine-infested areas. The OAS has stated that mine risk education continues in the areas of Crucitas, Jocote, Las Tiricias, San Isidro, Pocosol, Medio Queso and La Guaria. Mine risk education programs include educating the young, utilizing public talks and distributing educational materials.

## Demining

Costa Rican demining utilizes assistance from two international supervisors, 41 professional deminers and four mine-detecting dogs (MDDs). The Unit of Sappers of the Costa Rican Security Force employs numerous indigenous personnel for mine action.

Funding from the United States has helped Costa Ricans to obtain mine clearance training, purchase mine detection equipment and MDDs, enhance medical evacuation capabilities, establish a communications base and receive survivor assistance and medical supplies. The United States completed its obligation to Costa Rica in 2001 after the country reached the sustainment phase in its humanitarian demining program. According to the Assistance Mission for Mine Clearance in Central America (MARMINCA), as of June 2004, Costa Rica had destroyed 341 mines. In total, Costa Rica has cleared 131,903 square meters of land, which is now habitable and



usable by the population. The Inter-American Defense Board (IADB) and the OAS have declared that Costa Rica is the first country in those respective programs to be free of landmines.<sup>1</sup> Costa Rica is considered a model country of the positive impact of organized demining programs.

## Reality Check

In December 2002, Costa Rica was able to declare itself free of landmines, boasting extremely low landmine accident/casualty numbers. Under the stipulations of the Ottawa Convention, which the country signed in 1997, Costa Rica was required to clear all of its landmines by 2009, making its recent accomplishment that much more substantial.

## Endnote

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.

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