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El Salvador

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El Salvador

History

Although El Salvador gained its independence from Spain in 1838, oppressive regimes controlled the nation from that time through the 20th century. In the late 1970s, leftist groups, most notably the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), violently lashed against the ruling government. Fraudulent elections dashed the prospects of a full democracy, and by 1980, the country became mired in a full-scale civil war.

In 1992, after 12 years of fighting, the United Nations was able to broker the Peace Accords and end the war. Subsequently, the FMLN was allowed to participate in democratic elections. However, recent events that include Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and several earthquakes in 2001 have not only hampered economic recovery efforts, but repositioned landmines that remain in the country, furthering the menace's danger.

Landmine/UXO Overview

Following the civil war's end in 1992, some 20,000 landmines remained in 425 minefields covering 436 square kilometers of El Salvador. The FMLN positioned the majority of these landmines to discourage counter-insurgency sweeps, while the Salvadoran military laid the remainder to protect bases and encampments. Although Mauricio Granillo Barrera, El Salvador's ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) maintains the country is mine-free, in 2001, a national media inquiry concerning the explosion of anti-personnel mines and other UXO left after the war led Marcos Alfredo Valladares, then Attorney General in the Office for Human Rights, to admit, "Many have concluded that country is mine-free, but that is in contrast to reality."¹ Indeed, following the completion of the National Demining Plan in 1994, the International Danger Disaster Assistance (IDAS), as well as the Armed Forces, FMLN and United Nations Observer

Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL) guaranteed that 97 percent of the mines in place following El Salvador's civil war were cleared. El Salvador signed the Ottawa Convention in 1997 and ratified it in 1999, and it is also party to Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

Casualties

Although no official information is available on landmine casualties in El Salvador, from January 1994 through mid-1995, 271 Salvadorans were injured by UXO. Of these, 42 were children. Between 1998 and 2002, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that local media reported 22 UXO casualties. While no comprehensive estimates of the total casualties from El Salvador's civil war have been made, it is known that landmines began to take a serious toll on both combatants and civilians in the mid-1980s.

Demining

The 2003 *Landmine Monitor* reports that during 1998–2000, a UK-based mine clearance non-government organization (NGO), the International Demining Group (IDG), and its Salvadoran NGO partner, the Foundation for Cooperation and Community Development of El Salvador (CORDES), located some 150 square kilometers of land requiring survey and/or demining operations, including 53 previously unknown or unrecorded UXO/mine locations. Also, in September 2002, IDG located 33 sites suspected of being UXO-affected. Between June 2000 and August 2001, El Salvador reported the destruction of 1,291 mines. In February 2003, El Salvador destroyed 5,248 mines, thereby completing the project ahead of the deadline mandated by the Ottawa Convention, July 1, 2003. For training and development, El Salvador will retain 96 anti-personnel mines.



Reality Check

Despite government representatives' insistence that El Salvador is mine-free, IDG asserts that the UXO issue in rural areas remains a significant problem. It reports that the UXO clearance project from March 1993 to January 1994 lacked accurate information on the number and configuration of mined areas. In July 2003, IDG found that while El Salvador has largely succeeded in de-activating UXO, uncleared items remain. Moreover, while government officials downplay the need for public education concerning landmines, IDG found that risk education "is an urgent requirement."

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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