

Nicaragua

History

Nicaragua's landscape is as volatile as its past. Located in Central America south of Honduras and north of Costa Rica, its land is troubled by earthquakes, 40 volcanoes, landslides and tropical hurricanes. Nicaragua received its political independence from Spain in 1821 and became an independent republic in 1838. From 1896, it was ruled under a dynasty/dictatorship established by President Anastasio Somoza García until a bloody revolution occurred in 1979 led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Over a decade of internal conflict caused Nicaragua to be heavily mined before most of the fighting ended in 1990. Since 1990, the Nicaraguan economy has slowly tried to recover but was heavily affected by Hurricane Mitch, which hit Central America in 1998.

Landmine/UXO Overview

The landmine problems in Nicaragua are a result of the intense internal fighting during the 1980s. By 1990, an estimated 135,000 landmines were laid throughout Nicaragua in addition to a significant amount of UXO. Despite much progress in mine clearance operations in Nicaragua, the threat of landmines is still a major hindrance to civilians' restoring their lives in several regions in Nicaragua. The most heavily impacted areas are along Nicaragua's northern border with Honduras.

Casualties

The Organization of American States (OAS) reports that since landmine incidents began to be reported in 1980, there have been 724 landmine and UXO casualties as of March 2004, including 68 deaths. But since 1998, the number of mine accidents has declined steadily each year. However, the statistics do not account for the landmine and UXO incidents that occur in rural areas where the

incidents often are unreported. The majority of the casualties are among males, including children. Deminers have also been killed and injured in 23 separate accidents in Nicaragua.

Demining

The Nicaraguan army carries out mine clearance with support provided by visiting military forces in cooperation with the OAS. Mine-detecting dog (MDD) programs that began in 1998 have helped speed up the demining process in Nicaragua. With the help of approximately 600 sappers, the Nicaraguan army has been able to clear 794 mined areas.

In September 2002, Nicaragua declared its southern border with Costa Rica the first "mine-free" region in the country.¹ In 2003, Nicaragua reported completing mine clearance projects in the following regions: Boaco, Chinandega, Chontales and the Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS). Nicaragua announced in 2003 that it hoped to finish mine clearance throughout the country by 2005, but this deadline may be pushed back to 2006 due to issues with funding availability.

Reality Check

Early in the 1990s, Nicaragua was considered one of the most mine-affected nations in Central America. The situation in Nicaragua was also complicated by Hurricane Mitch, which hit in 1998 and caused significant damage with massive flooding and landslides heavily affecting demining efforts. However, the OAS and the Nicaraguan army, with the support of foreign donors, have responded to the landmine crisis and have made Nicaragua's demining program one of the most advanced and successful programs in Central America. In addition, the OAS and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have continued to sponsor



mine risk education and awareness programs. One of these programs is the "We Take the Safe Path" program, which works to help prevent further casualties for children and adults in mine-affected areas.

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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